

In Friday's newsletter, Jo invites us to talk about Christmas at our school. As one of the several parents greatly unnerved and surprised by this religious expression, I talked to Jo frankly and respectfully, I hope, about my distress, concern, and sadness. In the interests of school harmony, and for the sake of my daughter, I had resolved to more or less keep my feelings to myself. We feel fortunate to be at Runnemed, and are happy here, so I said to myself, "this will all be over soon enough."

But Jo's generous and inclusive request encouraged me to rethink my decision to remain silent. More, it clarified my *responsibility* to share my thoughts. As concerned, involved parents, we of course disagree with a great many things, some trivial, some critical, about our school. This would be so wherever our children went. We know that the larger decision — which school to attend — is the important one. Once decided, our support, care, involvement and hard work matter far more for our kids than the details of the school's agreement with our own specific agendas, beliefs, traditions and styles. We may think one thing worth studying more than another, one style of teaching superior, one manner of social interaction the right one. We express ourselves respectfully (that is also our duty) and move on. Having made a covenant of trust with the school and its teachers — a covenant which holds our children's welfare above all — we are committed to working through the rough spots.

But, for some reason, and for some of us, religion takes on a great deal more significance than the trade-off between a half-hour of Latin or horseback riding. Perhaps that is why it merits the kind of attention Jo devoted to it in the newsletter. Maybe that explains my depression, disillusionment and confusion a few days ago. Like many of us Runnemed parents, our family's move from public to private school was not without regret. We came here not for ideological reasons, but for our specific child's specific benefit. In fact, we believed and still do in the principle of public education. But our general socio-political beliefs, no matter how strong, will not take precedence over our daughter's education and well-being. In our case, as in many others, I'm sure, no matter how much we appreciate Runnemed and feel comfortable here, a certain ambivalence remains about moving away from one kind of community, our town's education system, to another, a private school.

So after talking to Jo about Christmas at Runnemedede, I found myself feeling more than a bit disenchanting, and downright homesick for that wonderful protection of public education, the separation of church and state, where the common good of the minority and the majority is respected, and no one, not the school board, the voters, nor the President of the United States gets to decide how we'll worship, or more importantly, *that* we'll worship. This luminous faith called freedom of religion is not, I fully understand, relevant to private schools — whoever runs the school gets to pick the faith — but I found myself realizing how deeply I worshipped that particular creed.

A few weeks ago we gathered as a community and watched our children stand on stage and perform under the blazing harshness of theatre lights. It seemed to me, watching them (through several rehearsals and three performances!) that these lights, through their merciless contrast, brought out something of the inner personalities of these mysterious kids who we are all slowly coming to understand. Awash in those lights, these personalities seemed to me, without exception, extraordinary and beautiful. In some strange way I felt grateful for this unrelenting focus which illuminated our children's selves, allowing perhaps, little bit of who they will become to shine through.

A disagreement as powerful, as unresolvable, and as blinding as the one some of us feel now with regard to religion seems to me a little like those spotlights. The intensity of the controversy throws the shadows of our ideas into sharper relief, higher definition.

Thinking about this, and feeling that maybe one of my real jobs as a parent is to focus the diffuse spectra of adversity, problems and sadness into a more singular guiding light for my child, I went home a few nights ago and talked to her at length. We spoke about a different stellar vision, the first ammendment, which seems to me to be essential to anything we might call our common "culture." I explained to her the difference between public and private schools, and why the wise men who founded our country felt the need to protect the minority from the tyranny of the majority, in all things (not just religion). I told her that in the country in which she was born (Peru)

and in the countries in which her great-grandparents were born, this is not the case. We talked about religion, about schools, and about community.

In the course of that talk, we both grew to understand a little more about compromise, protecting others' feelings, and what spirituality really is. We talked about Runnemedede, and agreed that even when we disagreed with something our teachers or parents said or did, we would respect their points of view, always ultimately finding strength in our own. So Christmas at Runnemedede afforded me the very positive opportunity to have a wonderful talk with my daughter about why I disliked it so much. I think this kind of thing should be followed by saying what you *do* like. As a result, I had the chance to tell someone I loved very much what, in fact, I *do* believe in. I'm thankful for that experience.

Personally, I would like Runnemedede to study all religions and cultures, celebrate none. I'd like my daughter to know about Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Shakerism, Sufiism, and Navajo beliefs. I'd like her to wonder at the rich, equally complex cultures emanating from these and all the world's traditions. Conversely, I don't particularly want my daughter's school to celebrate Kwansa, Chanukah, Christmas, or Ramadan. That's why we have churches, synagogues, mosques, and freedom of religion. But I'm not in charge, and not complaining about that (I have my own job!). I feel fine about moving on from this topic, and even better that it occasioned, in my family, a significant learning experience. Not so parenthetically, I feel blessed by the awareness that we *can* talk about these things openly in this vibrant community which is the Runnemedede school.

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December 5, 1998