

# *Preface*

## *America's Continuing Educational Canterbury Tales*

**T**he actors, voices, and travelers on the road to an improved public educational system in America continue to multiply and grow louder. It can be likened to a pilgrimage to a desired shrine at some far off juncture, a promised state where the schools are uplifted to a position of pure excellence from which individual prosperity and national security lie forever guaranteed and entombed. The reality, however, is that we are all pilgrims on the road to Canterbury, like Geoffrey Chaucer's late 1300s portraits of the stable of characters assembled at the Tabard Inn in Southwark going to the shrine of St. Thomas à Beckett.

The lives, stories, and motives of Chaucer's pilgrims comprise one of the world's literary masterpieces, and in it, Chaucer had perfected what is called "the rhyme royal," a seven-line stanza of poetry (*Concise Columbia Encyclopedia*, 1994, p. 164).

The rhetoric of the American pursuit to the shrine of national educational excellence is our political "rhyme royal," from the Reagan administration's proclamation of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the George W. Bush administration's *No Child Left Behind* in 2001, and now the Obama administration's *Race to the Top* in 2009. The fellow travelers in this pilgrimage represent a cast of characters from the most venal (pilgrims who want American education to wipe out global competitors in the international game of economic dominance) to the most pious and innocent (pilgrims who want to ensure that all children are eternally happy, proficient, and economically independent living in a world that is forever safe and just).

The assemblage of characters and interests in our national pilgrimage has seen the creation of an interlocking apparatus consisting of high ranking politicians in both parties, the issuance of national proclamations and reports, a wide range of state initiatives, independent manifestos from think tanks on the political left and right, independent foundation agendas and projects, and a volatile mixture of local political issues from bankrupt inner city school systems to battles to end school busing to attain the goals of integration regarded by some as an atavistic social remnant from the previous millennia.

The American educational shrine of public elementary and secondary education is wrapped in what Michael Parenti (1978) has called the *sacrandas*, that is, its sacrosanct beliefs about its identity anchored in its core values. As Parenti (1978) observes, the *sacrandas* represents, “The interests of an economically dominant class [which] never stand naked. They are enshrouded in the flag, fortified by the law, protected by the police, nurtured by the media, taught by the schools, and blessed by the church” (p. 84). The *sacrandas* are the basic narratives Americans resonate to as they picture the good life, the desired social system, and the outcomes they want from the existence of a *political ladder* to improve one’s lot in the economic system or simultaneously preserving one’s place in that same system.

Therein represents one of the most fundamental tensions in American educational life. The pilgrims on the road to our educational shrine are going to worship because some of them see their journey as a way to advance their own interests and well-being, while others see it as a way to ensure their position of influence is retained. What Parenti (1978) tells us is that the shrine itself is a symbol of the dominance of those who hold the power because its definition of importance was determined by them. Bourdieu (1984) has called this intersection of interests, attitudes, values, and position in the social structure a *habitus* and comments that while there is *space* between those of higher and lower position, both classes work within the same structure. It is, therefore, *homologous*. As in the road to Canterbury, the journey to the shrine is the homologous rationale and structure that encompasses a wide range of interests, motives, and visions for the pilgrims travelling within and on it.

This book, therefore, fits into the American pursuit of a more perfectible public school system. First released in 1992 by Corwin Press, it has enjoyed a robust and extended period of attention and

sales. That in itself is testimony that readers found something in its exposition and explanation worthwhile and useful. But the book is more than a technical and temporary solution to the issues that continue to fuel the national debate about educational excellence. At a more profound level, it raises questions about our beliefs, goals, and aspirations and whether any political agenda, no matter how noble and wrapped in its most potent symbolic *sacrand*, is anything more than the difference between the stories of the pilgrims and their collective ride toward a secular shrine and their own revelations, shortcomings, compromises, and contradictions. Perfectibility is always a journey. Perfection is a shrine. This work is about the journey, and as such, it will include some revelations, inevitable shortcomings and compromises, as well as its share of contradictions. We are all travelers on the same road, and this book is simply my story in our continuing educational *Canterbury Tales*.