

Berkshire Eagle, The (Pittsfield, MA)

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Deface or embrace?

To the Editor of THE EAGLE: Several weeks ago, amid a heated exchange of letters in The Eagle over naming a school under construction in Great Barrington after W.E.B. Du Bois, I happened to walk through Mahaiwe Cemetery, across from the Great Barrington Fairgrounds. It is there that the Great Barrington Historical Society, in 1994 had erected a marker to designate the graves of Du Bois' two-year-old-son Burghardt (1899) and his wife Nina (1950).

Because that cemetery is sacred to me, when I came across the century-old cross, with its worn chiseled "Burghardt" smashed at the base and face down in the grass, I was stunned. After contacting the police, I temporarily removed the damaged artifact to my bookstore for safekeeping.

Did that heated exchange of letters produce such an outrage -- even a hate crime -- or was it simply vandalism? All I know for certain is that at times, timing can be everything.

Deface or embrace W.E.B. Du Bois? Local historian Bernard Drew recommends that we should judge the civil rights activist by the sum total of his life's work. Others feel that we should turn our backs on that illustrious native son because he had turned his back on us by joining the Communist Party at age 93. If, in fact, the idea of naming the new facility after Du Bois did provoke such wanton destruction, then intelligent discussion and historical perspective are critical in averting a most regrettable showdown.

Because Great Barrington had played a central part in his life, even at its close, perhaps Du Bois himself should be taken literally at his last word. Indeed, in a letter written two years before his death, he clearly had on his mind the well-being of his hometown -- its "natural Main Street," the Housatonic River, and its townspeople. "The Housatonic," Du Bois reminded a Searles School Alumni Association member in 1961, should always remain "a clear and limpid stream, flowing gently through grass, trees and flowers; flanked by broad roadways and parks as the life stream of a town . . . This would emphasize Great Barrington . . . as a town of homes as it used to be; as a place where men dreamed and thought and sought the meaning of living . . ."

His words struck a chord in me -- our new W.E.B. Du Bois School should be "a place where our children can dream and think and seek the meaning of living."

RANDY WEINSTEIN

Great Barrington, August 4, 2004