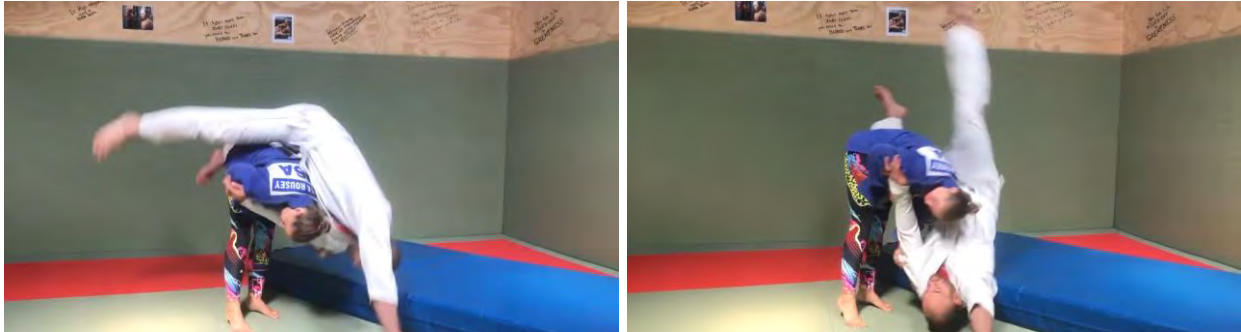


My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 37

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Selected essays of Lionel Trilling, the great 20th Century Columbia professor, critic, and thinker, have been gathered in a collection titled "The Moral Obligation To Be Intelligent." To the extent we have diluted our educational system by supplanting the narrow path with the wide and easy one, by shying from imposing the rigors of disciplined study on our students, we have failed in a primary moral obligation to them as our children and as citizens of this country. Some of the greatest modern writers trained with Professor Trilling, among them, Thomas Merton (Whittaker Chambers was a classmate of Trilling's; Gertrude Himmelfarb, an understudy and colleague). He was an intense taskmaster but the intellectual benefits gifted to the 20th Century were immense. The erosion of our national educational ambition, which has been steadily eating away at our cultural foundations for more than 60 years, robs us of the patrimony left to us by our forebears such as Trilling. And it is a moral failing.

When my father studied with the Jesuits at St. Ignatius in San Francisco, both Latin and Greek were required. The classics were always read in the original. By the time I attended school, not only was Latin not offered, but the classics were rarely taught. What have we lost? Western Civilization's foundations reside in the classical world. As noted previously, the origins of our civilization are found in the dynamic interface between Hebraism and Hellenism. One cannot intelligently read the "Federalist Papers," documents essential to our founding as a constitutional republic, without classical reference. Absent the study of Thucydides' "The Peloponnesian War," our own Revolutionary War makes less sense. This threatens the foundations of our republic.

I am not arguing for a return to the study of classical Latin and Greek, however, I do think we have abandoned much of our academic rigor, lowered expectations, and defused challenge, because educators often misconceive how students attain a sense of "esteem," personal dignity, and happiness. These are not innate states of being, but can only be achieved by personal growth, meeting adversity, and overcoming fear. We must be willing to do hard things.

Which brings me around to T.S. Eliot. If Eliot is even read at all in class today, the student will likely lack any of the intellectual foundation or analytic tools necessary to grasp the poet's meaning. Post-modernists make light of this (after all, who cares about what "dead white men" thought?) as if meaning were always and only independently derived. But this posture robs us of the cultural foundation necessary for an authentic transmission of knowledge, understanding, and tradition. Much is lost. We are raising little Jacobins.

Thus, I emphasized to my classes that literature is an intergenerational dialogue, and one must have a

competent grasp of the past to intelligently participate in the present. T.S. Eliot's work became Exhibit #1 for this proposition. Without knowledge of the Greeks, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, and the Gospels, an informed reading of "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock" is impossible. The imagistic depth of the poem would leave the reader wondering... and wandering far afield from the poet's intended meaning. And Eliot did intend to mean something. Written while Eliot was a graduate student, reading philosophy and Dante at Harvard in 1908, the poem describes Prufrock's walk across the rougher areas of Boston to attend a Victorian High Tea in a tonier section of town. As Prufrock makes his external journey, a spiritual struggle roils within him. In an echo of Dante, Prufrock's attachment to sin and his well dressed, socially constructed self, viscerally conflict with his conscience and an emerging spirituality. He feels "pinned" like a specimen in the image he has vainly projected, the self which is socially approved, while his original nature and heart cry out for liberation. A favorite pair of lines of mine capture Prufrock's desire to lose himself in an existence of selfish grasping: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across floors of silent seas." Sadly, Prufrock steps into the High Tea, buries his conscience, and loses the struggle - at least for the moment - "Till human voices wake us, and we drown."

If the poem is read without any knowledge of Dante, students will misread the romantic intimations in the poem, "Is it perfume from a dress/ That makes me so digress?" and think that Prufrock is simply too insecure to sexually consummate a social relationship. Such a reading is, in fact, diametrically opposed to Eliot's meaning. I warn students about using online resources, which are notoriously misleading, when I assign their weekend essay. A distinct percentage of the students, either don't pay attention or think that I won't actually read their papers, and suffer the consequences grade wise.

A curriculum can be challenging but engaging and enjoyable. The enterprise must be meaningful for young men and women, the student feeling that the time spent wrestling with philosophical questions and literary analysis is well spent. The key lies in the connection of heart the teacher makes with the student. The transmission of knowledge is a relational exchange and with uplifted minds and open hearts, the possibility for moments of wonder and mystic insight emerge. When those moments of awakening dawned in a class, no one ever forgot them.

But class should also be quirky and fun. Having the Guide Dogs changed the chemistry of my room. Kids would tell me that they were thinking of taking a "mental health day," and staying at home, but didn't because they would miss seeing the puppies.

Before we went co-ed, if a student came in late, rather than send him down to the office, I would employ one of my old Judo moves, the seoi-nage, an over the shoulder throw. Size didn't matter, as the throw is all a matter of agility, speed, and leverage. One of our football lineman, who later played for Stanford, determined in consultation with his classmates, to test this proposition, and intentionally arrived late one morning. Needless to say the physics worked but, when his bulk hit the deck, he made a loud bang heard several classrooms down.

Drawing on my MFT experience, when the class needed energizing, I would clear the desks from the middle of the room and we would have Sumo matches. Though occasionally blood was drawn and a student needed first aid, we were never ratted out to the administrators. The guys knew they had a good thing going and didn't want to blow it. Some of the best matches took place during the Spring Semester in the volleyball sand pit, which abutted the Physics, Chemistry, and Biology classrooms whose teachers coached football and baseball. Our pool of wrestlers sometimes swelled as they let their students join. Though some of my former students still want to talk about Homer, Dante, or Eliot, all of them want to reminisce about Judo throws and sand pit wrestling.