

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 31

J. Scharfen
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Tibetan bowl bell

I began every year by asking my students to define "beauty." It never failed that one of the young men would shout out, "BOOBS!" and the class would laugh, a ritual that would continue until the course became co-ed in 2011, and my male students suddenly became more circumspect. I naturally gravitated toward a Socratic teaching style and I would lead my students to the realization that their answer, though raucous, was in one sense correct: beauty is a harmony of parts, and we are hardwired to appreciate it in the symmetry of a woman's breasts. I would then ask the same question of "love." At this point, my classes

would warm to the task of philosophical inquiry. After dancing around a bit with this, I would lead them to the conclusion that "love is an emotional force uniting subject and object." From there, I would begin my lecture in earnest and explain the relationship between "love and beauty."

Introducing "virtue" as a response to love, I would help them to understand the way virtue blossoms in the unity between our minds and bodies. Thus, filial piety is the child's beautiful response to parental love; fidelity is the response to spousal love; loyalty is the response to fraternal love, and so on. We then looked at quintessentially beautiful works of art, such as Raphael's "Madonna and Child," to see visual examples. The conclusion of my lecture asserted that in each work of literature we explored in the coming year, in the human relations portrayed as authors developed their characters, we would discover either the presence or absence of love and beauty. By way of making my point, I described a scene I had witnessed while coaching water polo. We had gone to dinner as a team after a meet and as we gathered in the parking lot, we witnessed a couple exiting a bar. The wife had caught her husband with another woman and as they walked, she was hitting him and yelling, "You cheating bastard!" He responded by covering his head and yelling, "Stop you Bitch!" Everyone easily identified the behavior as ugly.

I took seriously the advice of Aristotle and Augustine, that the first object of education is to shape the affections of one's students. Teaching the appropriate objects of love is the beginning point of true ethics.

Over the summer, my students would have read two or more books in preparation for the class. I often assigned Mark Helprin's "A Soldier of the Great War," Yukio Mishima's "The Sound of Waves," C.S. Lewis's "The Abolition Man," or Thomas Merton's "The Seven Storey Mountain." Any of these works provided me with plenty of material to make a running start in the year.

We then read Bill Moyer's interview of Joseph Campbell, "The Hero's Adventure." From this, we drew several important pieces of information: a paradigmatic cycle exists for the hero's journey; a hero is a person who lives for the sake of others; and we are all on a "hero's journey," which is to say, the hero's journey is a spiritual path. This naturally lead us to "The Epic of Gilgamesh." We would read this aloud in class, and analyze the hero's journey as we proceeded. Our summer reading would be brought into the discussion, and we would look for similarities and contrasts. I emphasized to my students that literary works echo each other because literature is an intergenerational conversation about human meaning, in

which authors respond to earlier works, develop lines of thought, and very often disagree with predecessors. They, the students, were being invited to join this colloquy that extended back to the very origins of human consciousness, as our ancestors sat around fires beneath the stars and wove stories to place their loves, fears, hopes, and desires, their very existence into context.

Because young people have such a limited perspective on time, and "Gilgamesh" appeared to be so very distant from them, I asked them the age of the universe. "13.8 Billion years!" would come the response. I then asked them to visualize this expanse of time as a football field - the blades of grass, millimeters before the goal line, would be the realm of human consciousness. As we pondered that, the 5,000 year gap between the Sumerian authors of "Gilgamesh" and ourselves, appeared not very distant at all. Once I brought the class to this point, I needed to impress upon them the importance of allegory and metaphor as tools of human understanding - that we in the 21st Century were not only proximately close to our ancestors, we were not so distant in our perceptions and structures of consciousness. I would ask, "What is the most important metaphor in your lives?" Many of the science types would dismiss the question outright: What's important about metaphors? With a little encouragement, they would join the inquiry. In all my years of teaching, only one student came up with a satisfactory answer (he later went to Harvard, double majored in philosophy and neurobiology, obtained a masters degree in ethics, then went to Stanford Law School). The answer of course, was (and still is) the clock. Our conceptualizing of time, making use of numbers as symbols, is a metaphor for change; throughout human history, we have sought ways to measure and mark the movement of the sun, moon, stars, and resulting seasons. Human society could not function without metaphors representing time.

When students first entered this class, they arrived in varied states of spiritual somnolence, with a few rare exceptions. By the time they walked out the door, they had been awakened to a new sense of wonder and possibility. True Father, along with other thinkers, such as Abraham Joshua Heschel, have identified this wonder as the origin of religion.

To substantiate this sense of wonder, to preserve and develop it, I introduced my students to Zen meditation. At the beginning of class, I would lead a short session and gradually students could extend these moments as their mind-body discipline improved. Many students have continued this daily exercise. Even now, for former students who are meditators, I have a text thread on which I post a daily quote (including True Father's words on occasion).

I rarely had problems with classroom management because of this meditation practice. I am certain everyone remembers the sharp, obnoxious sound of ringing school bells. One day, while walking to class, I saw Avid, our director of maintenance, removing an old steel bowl type bell from the exterior wall of our school. I asked him what he intended to do with it and, when he told me he was going to trash it, I claimed the bell. I brought it to my classroom and placed it on the rope stand made for my smaller Tibetan bell. I hit it with my wood striker and it emitted a most rich and deep tone. When I introduced the new bell to my class, I emphasized how we, like the bell, can be either sharp, over anxious, and obnoxious, or we can find our authentic tone, rich and deep. The transformation hinged on finding our true purpose. I then whispered to the class that when I rang it outside of meditation, the bell had another message for them... "Shut the Fuck Up!"

From that day forward, when I needed to bring the class to order, I would simply strike the bell and students would impose quiet on their classmates by shouting "Shut the Fuck Up!" Amazingly, everyone would settle down and regain their focus. Of course, the administration heard of this practice as word filtered through the student grapevine, but, at an all boys school, having a bit of a barracks atmosphere never hurt. And who was going to argue with what worked? Our Dean of Discipline, Luis Rosales, a Marine Sergeant in earlier days, found the bell routine particularly praiseworthy.