

My Unificationist Memoirs Chapter 33

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The Death of Socrates (1787), by Jacques-Louis David

Following Homer's "Odyssey," we read the selection from Plato's "Apology" in which Socrates stands trial. Within this passage, Plato touches on Socrates' teaching about righteousness and justice, as well as on punishment and the afterlife. Students found this dialogue provocative. Their questions and discussion opened the way for me to teach on the purpose of life as preparation for our eternal existence in the spiritual world. True Father's analogy that our body is the soil our spirit grows in, deeply affected them and often awakened a more sharp sense of conscientiousness. Each year, a coterie of students would start staying after class to pursue the train of thought that had been the lesson's theme. These after class colloquies became a measure for me of the effectiveness of that day's lecture. I always tried to convey words of eternal value to my students, in a manner that would open their hearts, raise their minds, and allow God to work. My daily preparation for class consisted of prayer more than review of my notes, though both were important.

When we completed our short excursion into "The Apology," I introduced Plato's dialogue "Gorgias." I selected this dialogue because as a freshman in college, I had read it for my "Introduction to Philosophy" class at Marquette University. The dialogue had so moved me then, I felt I could teach it to my students with energy and conviction. We would take parts and read it aloud in class, always leaving time for questions and analysis. Themes such as the most unhappy person is one who does wrong but escapes punishment, that the tyrant is in fact the most pitiable person, and that it is better to suffer wrongdoing rather than be a wrongdoer, struck Athenians of the classical age as patently absurd. In a society that read the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey," and lionized the heroic men of action characterized in those works, Socrates seemed not only an oddity, but a threat to the youth of the polis - thus his unjust trial and

execution.

Plato's dialogues awakened a sense of righteousness within my sophomores. I always would circle back to contemporary cultural issues and the personal lives of my students, so they would not miss the opportunity for reflection and growth. To further this pedagogical goal of mine (and God's) rather than give an in-class written exam, I assigned a project for their semester final. Each year, I had my students write their own dialogue, modeled on Plato's. The assignment required the student to select, in addition to Socrates, two other characters from our first semester materials, (and some years, one historical figure) and write a dialogue in which they discussed the proposition that it is "better to suffer wrong than do wrong." Each of the persons selected had to remain in character. Statements which were substantive in nature required either a direct quote or a cite to a text which supported the students assertion. Thus, students would learn their MLA citation format, as well as begin to master analogical reasoning and basic rules of logic. It never failed that some quiet student would utterly surprise me with depth of thought and expressive skill. Often, our school magazine would select a number of these dialogues for publication because of their creativity and snappy writing.

I always kept my students writing. I tried to read everything they wrote, though I did not edit or grade each piece of work with the same intensity or weight. In this age of easy digital access, I had to exercise great care to discourage plagiarism. Considering that much of our material intentionally raised questions of ethics and conscience, I found this highly ironic, though not surprising. When I first started teaching, the assigned summer reading had been a novel by Kate Chopin, "The Awakening." The students were to write their reflections after reaching certain milestones in the text. This writing, together with a test on the day classes began, were meant to ensure that students had actually done the summer work. Teachers took the reading assignments seriously and used the summer materials to launch their courses in the Fall.

Thus, in my still naive innocence as a new teacher, it came as a surprise to me when one of my young men, a tough three sport athlete, turned in a reading log for the Chopin book that included in one reflection a sentence which opened, "As a young woman..." This being long before the phenomena of gender uncertainty, I could easily spot this as my first encounter with high school plagiarism. What ought a teacher to do? Here was a young man who was so intent on copying his girlfriend's work, that he had not even taken the time to process what he was converting into his own longhand script. I am certain he thought I would never read it. I opened the class by praising the brilliance of his reflective insights, then I read the offending passage. The entire class, along with the culprit, broke into laughter. The school rules directed me to give the assignment an "F" and to send him down to the Dean of Discipline. Having been a typical high school miscreant myself, with a good friend who lent me his physics homework, I tended more towards understanding. I decided against sending him to the Dean, and allowed him two weeks to actually read the book and rewrite the reflection journal for a "C." He learned his lesson and did the work required, a win-win outcome from my perspective.

I assigned a novel by Umberto Eco, "The Name of the Rose," for my students to read over Christmas break to prepare for the Spring Semester. The work is set in a Benedictine monastery in the North of Italy in the early 14th Century. Although it is a murder mystery, Eco accurately portrays the theological and political controversies of the age. He thus set the table for our next great literary feast, Dante's "Inferno," the first of the three books found in the Divine Comedy - and one hell of a read....