

J. Evans Pritchard versus Carpe Diem

By
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Ah, the hallowed halls of my alma mater, a Catholic high school in Middleville. It was a place where the ubiquitous motto of sanctity, scholarship and discipline reigned supreme...at least to the administration. I, on the other hand had a somewhat different recollection of my time spent there. A few of my most vivid memories included the football and soccer players chasing each other around with a stuffed deer head, running from the cops through suburban Lakeland (long story), and complaining about each prospective prayer service that was to interrupt the day. It was too bad that my class never constructed a motto as thoroughly amusing as the one devised by the young men of Welton (or Hellton depending whom you ask) Academy in the *Dead Poets' Society*: travesty, horror, decadence, excrement.

As these boys, and any person fortunate enough to have been part of a private academic institution, know, the high school experience is often not as intellectually sacred as many would like to believe. In my experience, the more seriously an institution like Welton or my own high school takes itself, the more those who attend it search for the inherent flaws and ridicule them mercilessly.

The world of the exclusive Welton presented in *Dead Poets' Society* is a world of sky-high academic, moral, and social standards. Those who are educated there have rigorous course loads and an immense amount of pressure placed upon them. Parents, it seems, have their sons' lives already planned. Headmaster Mr. Nolan boasts that, of all the students to graduate, "Seventy-Five percent will go on to the ivy league." It does indeed seem to be "Hellton," to most boys, particularly Neal Perry.

Neal is the epitome of a Welton student: he studies intensely, doesn't cause trouble, and obeys his father's every wish. Mr. Perry has decided Neal's fate—he will go to Harvard and become a doctor. Each character presented in the movie finds himself resigned to more or less the same fate as Neal. The story is also set in a time, namely 1959, where parental authority was seldom challenged in normal circumstances, much less the restrictive Welton atmosphere. Each boy has had his road to success paved with the demands of parents and school administrators and will soon find himself partaking in the good life, which the parents and most who work at Welton see as wealth, power, and prestige. One man steps into the frenzy that is private preparatory education and bestows some wisdom into the young minds already skewed with the notion that success is money and Harvard equals happiness.

John Keating (Robin Williams) comes to Welton to teach English, but also to expand the minds of the fragile boys and turn them into free thinkers. He urges them to *carpe diem*—"Seize the day. Make your lives extraordinary." Out of Keating's unique and unconventional teaching style comes the birth of the Dead Poets' Society, an organization devoted to "sucking the marrow out of life."

Marrow sucking, however, was not high on the priority list of the parents of the Welton pupils. They were more concerned with material pursuits and literacy than with intellectual freedom and education. In fact, it seemed that the parents, namely Mr. Perry, were more concerned with keeping their own images intact by making their children into perfect God-fearing, power-wielding citizens. The teaching methods of Mr. Keating were a threat to the underlying yet stifling power of most of the adults in the movie.

This brought to light many of my own concerns about teaching. Is it really a world where educators are concerned with teaching only the mere J. Evans Pritchard's of life? Will I ever

face a trial as monumental as Mr. Keating faced following Neal's suicide? Just how many Mr. Nolans are there in the world and how many of them will I have to come in contact with? As is evidenced by the scapegoating of Mr. Keating, it is unquestionably simpler to ignore the problems that many youths must face and place blame with those who have been given the task of preparing them for life. That task, for better or worse, falls to teachers. With this task comes unexpected tragedy, unprecedented action, and often unfortunate consequences. I worry that I will be unable to face the career catastrophe of Mr. Keating and emerge with my outlook unscathed. But mostly I worry that I will turn into Mr. Nolan. It is a hefty responsibility to enlighten those who will one day be living as adults in the world. It is a responsibility I don't take lightly.

The precarious position of Mr. Keating reminded me of the fundamental lesson passed down to me by my grandparents (both public school teachers)—expect the unexpected. Whether or not I ultimately teach at a school as rigid and unrelenting as Welton, it is a safe bet that I will be faced with unforeseen challenges. And like Mr. Keating, I hope that I can establish the same level of respect and camaraderie that he shared with his students, particularly those in the Dead Poets' Society. That relationship overpowered the iron-fisted rule of Mr. Nolan and the expectations of unbending parents. The end of the film finds Mr. Keating facing dismissal from his position at Welton and wrongful blame for contributing to Neal's death. However, the quiet bond shared between Keating and his students proved more powerful than the yelling and cajoling of Mr. Nolan, with most of the students literally standing up for Keating. The painfully shy Todd Anderson, the nerdy Meeks, the cautious Pitts, and the majority of the class proclaimed Keating to be, "O Captain, my Captain," one final time.

I recall my own high school experience during this powerful closing scene. For as much hell-raising and nonsensical bureaucracy existed at school, it was an experience I would not change. There were always teachers who proved to be the Mr. Keatings of the time and seemed to make the rest of the day worth the gas money. They were inspirational, provocative, dedicated individuals who didn't just assign review questions. They became trusted friends and counselors, giving advice, sharing jokes, and inspiring their students to tenacity in all endeavors. They embodied Mr. Keating's first teaching: "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may."

Perhaps Welton's four pillars didn't stand to tall and perhaps my high school's motto was a bit ironic, but the commands to "gather ye rosebuds," "carpe diem," and "suck the marrow out of life," are of universal importance. For the sake of education, let us hope that all future teachers, myself included, can embrace, teach, and live these principles.

If nothing else, do it for the eradication of J. Evans Pritchard.