

A Multi-Colored Education

By Nathan L. Queener

Harry Chapin is a master at setting life's bitter poetry to music. His well-known "The Cat's in the Cradle", commits to paper the irony of the perception of time, and time lost between father and son. The equally popular "Taxi" examines a likely love lost that appears unexpectedly in a cab driver's backseat. The comic "30,000 Tons Of Bananas", a tale told in the Chapin speak, recounts the accident of a nearly dozing truck driver taking the bus home after having lost his load in a small town.

In the song "Flowers are Red", Chapin offers a warning to those who would teach, more specifically, a warning to those who would abuse the privilege. Chapin's little boy is delivered to school full of life. He sees a world full of colors with no rule as to which should apply to what. The crayons are daring him to draw, and he is up to the challenge. The teacher intervenes, noting that it is not time to draw, and adds that the colors the boy chooses are not appropriate. On the surface the teacher is correct, there is a time and place, and must be a sense of order to education. That order is to draw attention to the subject at hand; however, Chapin's teacher is not only after order; her aims are to stamp out the boy's enthusiasm.

The teacher is doing this for the boy's "own good"; she has seen this before. His view of the world, which offers flowers of different colors, can only be trouble. The boy's backpack will be red, while everyone else's will be blue. The "cool" kids will not play with him, because of his red backpack. The teacher knows this because she's seen it before. The "jocks" will not allow him to play because his tennis shoes will have yellow laces, and all the jocks know that only white ones will do. The teacher has seen this before. The "smart" kids will reject him, because they know that real roses are red. Pressed, they will agree, there roses of different colors and flowers that are not roses, but in school all flowers are roses, and only red roses are real. The teacher knows school, and to the school life this boy must conform. She puts Chapin's boy in the corner to think about his choice of flowers of varying colors. The teacher has done this before. She knows that he will eventually fall in line with the others. He will draw red roses with green stems, and eventually it will be all that he can see. His backpack will be blue, his laces will be white, and he will finally realize that all flowers, real flowers, are red.

A teacher, who dampens the spirit, teaches limitation. Those limitations say that classrooms are the four walls that exist in the schoolhouse. This undermines education. If the classroom is limited to the

structure, then the “inner-city” child, who sees blistering paint and dimly lit halls, limits their life to blistering paint and dimly lit halls. The suburban kid who attends the materially correct building, which exists, only on the edges of town, is limited to the material aspect of life, and will exist only on the edges of life. The teacher who taps into that enthusiasm will help that inner-city child see beyond the blistering paint and past the dimly lit halls. The teacher who recognizes that red and green flowers that work for some will not work for all, will enable that suburban child realize the clothes you wear, or the car you drive as the imposters that they are.

The enthusiasm, for some, is itself the vehicle for education. Teachers should take that advantage and make it their own. Teachers should be as ruthless as drug dealers when it comes to education, when it comes to their “turf”. If what gets to the child is loud music, then the English teacher should stomp on the floor in time with the beat of a Maya Angelou poem, sing-song through a Samuel Clemens short story; or shout loud enough to shake the rafters while reciting Patrick Henry’s 1775 address to the Virginia legislature. If it is the excitement of doing that addicts the would-be learner, then the Science teacher should stand a piece of glass on end and give a rock to the student and instruct him to throw it. After the sound of the breaking glass subsides, he/she should state calmly, “that is an example of an object in motion”. When the history teacher embarks on a lesson of those who occupied the White House over the years, then let him place their pictures in plastic bags, and stand outside his classroom. As the students file in he should hand them a bag, and whisper in their ear, “got dem’ dead presidents fo’ ya’.” Education is the most powerful drug of all, and it should be distributed with the passion it deserves.

Nothing written here is foreign to teachers who know. Chapin highlights these teachers at the end of his song. Chapin’s second teacher holds out the crayons to the boy, and even though it appears that it is too late, the true question is, will the second teacher give up? If the second teacher is successful, the lesson for the boy is that life is still a place of endless possibilities. If the second teacher is successful, then the little boy will be stronger from his experience with the first. The boy in the corner by himself was frightened into conformity. The man who grows from the fright will recognize that the problem was not conformity, or fear, but the willingness to give into fear. If Chapin’s second teacher is successful, the man who reflects back on the first teacher will not see a teacher who sought to control him, but will pity a

person with no vision. A person who seeks to limit others by their own limitations, must reside in a world of limited choice, where the only flowers are roses and can only be red with green stems.

If you listen closely to Harry Chapin's vocal interpretation of his song you will hear sadness in his voice. This sadness goes beyond the lyric. Perhaps it is the sadness of experience, maybe even a personal experience. Yet, the sadness in his voice out distances even that. The sadness is the boy's voice. The boy who was forced to sit in the corner. The boy who saw vibrant colors of every hue and was forced to relinquish them to survive in a world that could not accept his vision. This Chapin's boy of sadness never gets to experience the second teacher. He is the failure and victim of the abuser who hides behind the mask, education. This boy might commit suicide, but probably will not. This boy might bring a gun to school to kill his classmates, teachers and himself, but probably will not. This boy will may become bitter and join the people who populate the woods outside mainstream society, proclaiming civilizations end gun in hand, waiting; but probably he will not.

More likely, the boy will grow up; report to work; then come home and dream of great things in the middle of the night. A car that runs on pure oxygen; a formula which reverses AIDES; a system of bureaucracy which reduces want and need to zero while maintaining freedom and individualism. Excitedly, he will jot down a note or two, even make a plan, but with the light of day he will realize that everyone else is wearing blue backpacks and white shoelaces. He will toss his notes in the garbage, forget his plan and sit in his corner at work reminding himself that flowers are red with green stems.

It is the responsibility that is the most daunting aspect of teaching. The children will come in all sorts and fashions. They will be brave, scared, outspoken, shy, rich, poor, imaginative and in need of imagery. As Chapin sings: "There are so many colors in the rainbow.", and not one approach will satisfy all. It is the teacher's duty to give understanding to the rainbow. Teachers are in the position to let the "cool" kids understand that a red pack is just as cool as a blue one. Teachers are in the position to let the "jocks" understand that it is not the color of the laces that matter, but the talent, which occupies the shoe, that makes the difference. It is the teacher who must reach the "smart" kids and let them understand that even though the flowers in the book are red roses, the beauty of flowers cannot be reduced to one type, or one color. Finally, it is the teacher who must bring the "smart" kids, the "jocks" and the "cool" kids together with those who haven't found a niche, and let them examine each other. In that examination they

will surely see their differences, but it is the commonality that will reveal the limitations of the labels they have adopted.

Here too, the teacher is on dangerous ground. The path often tread is the “sameness” trail. The path leads us to marginalizing differences, not “our” differences, but usually “their” differences to make “them” more like “us”. In doing that the flavor of the stew is lost to the broth. The value of the individual is deluded amongst the group, which means neither the student or the progress of education has benefited from the examination.

If that occurs, then the essence of education is lost. A corollary exists for us to examine. It comes in the form of a dream, or more specifically, a dreamer. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is remembered oft times for one segment of a speech. It is played over and over again, to prove the greatness of the individual and sameness of us all. It is taught as great landmark of oration, presentation, vision and action of people who have come together to reside in a common place. In actuality, the speech touted as a great sign of the triumph of a commitment to peace, is a warning that the country King talks about has failed to live up to its promise. Through the first seventeen paragraphs King talks about that failure in a form of a promissory note, and a check to be cashed. He warns that feelings will not be calmed or cooled, and that freedom denied anywhere is freedom denied, and cannot be thought of as anything different. However, in the search for common ground, a safe place from which to teach, a palatable explanation for a mass uprising, King’s example of meticulous and great oratory has been reduced to a slogan, and taught as such. In fact the flavor of the vegetables has been lost to constant attention to the broth. Thus, is the folly of education which accepts only one vantage point, which seeks to reduce enthusiasm rather than us it, or insists that the only color of a flower is red, and the only flower, the only real flower, is a rose.

Like Chapin, there was sadness in King’s voice that went from his present to our future. Perhaps, even as he spoke, he realized that the dream will be remembered and the check laid aside for another time. Perhaps he knew, like Chapin, that sameness would be sought, when it is the difference that makes the stew rich and the broth palatable.

We are forewarned; those of us who take up the challenge to teach cannot abuse our position and say we did not know. Chapin allows us no escape. The melancholy in Chapin’s voice dares us, to make a difference. Chapin’s boy looks to us to acknowledge him, and make his difference count. We are here at

the edge of education with great tools at our fingertips. We have song, speeches, and voices, which call out to us, enthusiasms that challenge us, and time that is sacrificed for our endeavor. We distribute the most powerful drug of all, education. Minds so addicted, will understand the answers, but more importantly, will ask the questions which seek better understanding. Minds so challenged will seek out the colors of the rainbow for the brilliance of their difference, understanding the glue of sameness. They will understand the future dreams lay in promissory notes made good today. They will recognize that sometimes for the group to realize the value of the individual, one must sit in the corner and not be afraid that they are alone. Minds so educated will see that the best songs are those that are more than lyrics and music, but are visions flavored with the bittersweet taste of life. The words are dripping with sadness, their future to be taped on desktops and refrigerators, to remind one of the purpose of multi-colored crayons, the purpose of teaching.