

The Long Game

*My friend is a conversation artist
he's a bit shy about his talent (which makes me happy –
there's little worse than listening to someone who
uses words
to impress)
he chews his thoughts
feels their texture, discerns their delicate flavors
spits them out as perfectly formed questions
the same questions
that have rested somewhere in the back of my own mind
waiting
for the insight
and the courage
that would form them*

*how I admire my friend!
It's the question
that frees.*

Alright, let's put on our thinking caps! This was my first-grade teacher's daily mantra, her energetic appeal to her students to challenge our brains. Mrs. Freeman, the teacher who was my most beloved in all my years of schooling, insisted that her students think about every task we undertook. Her requirement was shared by all her peers at University School.

The school was established and run by The Ohio State University. My two siblings and I were able to attend the experimental K-12 school because our father was a university employee. The teaching faculty at University School were not only accomplished in their field (my kindergarten teacher had a Ph.D. in elementary education), but most importantly, they had a deep passion for preparing their students to thrive in life. Of course, each teacher's personality and teaching style was unique, yet their singular mission was to instill critical thinking: the ability to formulate questions that facilitate objective evaluation of an issue, and the use of the imagination to discover ways to move beyond a given set of circumstances.

Even in later years when University School was forced to close and I attended public school in Columbus, Ohio, learning to distinguish fact from opinion dominated much of my instruction. Creativity was also celebrated. Music and art were offered as standard additions to the core curriculum; students – even those from the lowest income families – participated in band, orchestra, chorus and drama; we had access to an art classroom supplied with materials that enabled any interested student to create a masterpiece; many of the students competed in various artistic and scientific competitions. Yes, we took standardized tests, but I think we all considered them a drudgery and inconvenience rather than a threat; the tests were announced, administered, and then scored without earth-shattering spectacle.

Seasons change. Our public education system has become highly politicized since the 1960's and '70's. Controversial justifications have been given for peeling away at critical thinking in K-12 education. State legislatures nationwide, in the face of decreasing student performance and having to make choices about funding priorities, have cut funding for arts education.¹ Additionally, politicians at the federal level have offered impossible choices to local school districts, making necessary funding dependent upon improved standardized test scores in math, English and science.² Private schools, not as dependent on federal funds, exercise far more control over their curriculum and can, if they choose, emphasize critical thinking and imagination. With only about 10% of U.S. students enrolled in private schools,³ the vast majority of students are educated in systems that prioritize test preparation over robust learning and discovery.

As a result, instead of asking questions, many Americans today desire short, simple answers and comfort themselves with opinions rather than with the pursuit of truth. The very notion of expanding our minds beyond what we understand or believe has become like a tiny feather taken by a gusty wind, landing somewhere in an unknowable distance.

From 2005 to 2008, I embedded myself in a high school classroom of a rural Ohio school system. My students were low-performing 11th and 12th graders, so I daily taught from curriculum materials I designed myself to build self-esteem and intellectual curiosity. My principal criticized my efforts, saying that I was better suited to teach in a

program for gifted students. In her mind and in the minds of far too many school administrators and politicians, the act of questioning is privileged.

I think of today's students, far more exposed to targeted deception than the students I tutored. Social media now consumes us, spreading faux answers to questions we've been unable to muster, like a saint bestowing blessings on the needy. I shudder at the sheer amount of misinformation that we all inhale, unfiltered; information intended only to affirm existing perspectives, to soothe.

As a nation, we don't ponder nearly enough. Our streamlined education, stressful jobs, chaotic home life, and struggle to get through each day with a modicum of sanity leave us with little skill, time, or inclination to reflect or to evaluate much of anything. Americans have largely become a nation of reactionaries living in an age of idiocy.

Resistance to a national political agenda that minimizes social welfare and human dignity is a long game that is won when our citizenry is well-practiced in the art of thinking. Only then will Americans soundly refuse to tolerate attacks on reason, attacks that take the form of policies that maintain huge wealth disparities, systemic racism, and a dying natural world; only then will we hold as sacred the moral evolution of our society.

This long game begins with each of us as parents, uncles, aunties, grandparents, and neighbors investing more time in our children. This ongoing investment is now critically important in light of Covid-19 school closures that have resulted in woefully inadequate online learning for many students.⁴ Reading to our youngest children, then asking them "Why do you think . . . ?" questions about the story or information is an act of resistance to the status quo. Talking to our older youth about their classroom and life experience, encouraging (or requiring) them to express their thoughts and opinions on what they are learning is an act of resistance. Regularly engaging our children in active imagination activities such as brainstorming, story writing and storytelling, and art projects of their choosing are acts of resistance.

Publicly, we can reach out to our local teachers' unions once the Covid-19 pandemic has abated. Listening to and learning from teachers about their efforts at encouraging critical thinking is an act of resistance, as is asking teachers how we can assist in their efforts. When enough citizens take these more public steps, we may

eventually garner support for a union-wide embrace of expanded critical thinking curriculum as an essential demand – another act of resistance. Teachers’ unions can then bring the issue to bear on their local and statewide districts and on national political agendas.

This long game is ambitious in an age of so much social chaos. Like all forms of resistance, it requires strategy, persistence, and courage; it also begs us to imagine a society in which people carefully evaluate ideologies and policies before embracing them. Critical thinking is perhaps the greatest threat to those in power who prefer masses of intellectually diminished people easily manipulated to disconnect themselves from each other and from the natural world, masses who become expendable in the ruthless pursuit of profit by the powerful.

My first-grade teacher surely did not realize that she was planting the seed of resistance to this type of American tyranny every time she challenged her students to think and imagine. Our insistence on elevating critical thinking in public education is fundamental to our nation’s progress; indeed, it is a form of resistance that is essential to the long-term success of all other resistance efforts.

¹[The Anti-Art Education Stance](#)

²[Do Standardized Test Scores Factor in to How Much Money a School Will Receive?](#)

³[Council for American Private Education](#)

⁴[This entire second-grade D.C. class fell behind in reading. Now what?](#)

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