

**A Few Thoughts on Issues of Class, Race, Gender, Sexual Orientation, and
other Sensitive Issues in the Literature Classroom
(George Washington Institute, Boston, Mass, July, 2005;
Dr. Peter Gibbon, Instructor)**

We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.
Speak or act with an impure mind
And trouble will follow you
As the wheel follows the ox that
Draws the cart.

We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we make the world.
Speak or act with a pure mind
And happiness will follow you
As your shadow, unshakable.

How can a troubled mind
Understand the way?

Your worst enemy cannot harm you
As much as your own thoughts
Unguarded.

But once mastered
No one can help you as much,
Not even your father or your mother.

--Buddha, *Dhammapada*

If the Awakened One is right, then every human being carries some responsibility for the cultivation and governance of a healthy and compassionate mind. An old fashioned parish priest could lay on a guilt trip about impure thoughts, but perhaps impure thoughts are those that:

* from a Buddhist perspective, keep one from living the eightfold path;

* from a great monotheist perspective (Jewish, Christian, Muslim), keep one from living in harmony with the will and the word of G*d, the Lord, or the Merciful One;

* from the perspective of Stephen Covey, keep one from living the principles that should be at one's core or center;

* from a humanistic perspective, keep one from living a life of compassion and tolerance.

The issue I'm getting around to considering is known variously as or an element of progressive education, multiculturalism, liberalism, political correctness. Specifically, how do teachers of good will help students confront painful issues and tease apart complexities in history or literature?

Peter H. Gibbon offers excellent insights in "Ten Lessons" (NCHE, 16, 9; May 2004, etc.). Mr. Gibbon seems to want people to take five-hundred year evolutionary views of historical figures instead of practicing presentism (all things can be judged according to standards deemed appropriate *today*), engaging in political gamesmanship, or issuing dismissive or conversation-killing remarks based on a transgression against a class, race, or group that is, has been, or considers itself aggrieved, victimized, or oppressed. To follow Mr. Gibbon's advice would be to cultivate or encourage sophisticated and principled reader-responders who know a lot about history, literature, and culture.

The notion of helping students develop critical thinking skills is anything but new. In "Thinking as a Hobby," an essay written about 1961, William Golding claimed there are three grades of thinking. Grade 3 is "feeling rather than thought" and applies to some 90% of the human race--according to WG. Grade 2 thinking is "the detection of contradictions." It "destroys without having the power to create." Grade 2 thinking is kind of fun, especially for adolescents--one is free to point out deficiencies, hypocrisies, errors in the positions or arguments of one's elders, but one has nothing to put in place of the ideas, institutions, or arguments one enjoys ripping to shreds. Pontius Pilate is cited as a Grade 2 thinker ("What is truth?"...implying, well, we don't know, so to hell with it, let's get on with the torture). But Grade 1 thinking "asks, what is truth? and then sets out to find it." Albert Einstein is cited as a Grade 1 thinker, and other Grade 1 thinkers are mentioned as gathering dust in the library. Golding learned about thinking by studying his arrogant headmaster and his inconsistent teachers. In a culture in which adolescent mentalities and rhetorical personas are common--witness the scream fests on cable tv shows every night, notice how rarely one hears from leaders who can or will confront the complexities of an issue...they are too busy demonstrating--in ridiculous but effective ads--most of the logical fallacies that used to taught in freshman logic classes, especially ad hominem, strawman (strawperson?) red herring, oversimplification, post hoc, and equivocation.

We all know the strategies that are used to control debates or discussions in this country.

* People demonize those at ideological odds by using loaded questions (such as Sean Hannity does every time he confronts a guest who disagrees with him), by using words designed to suggest oppression or exploitation (*hegemony, patriarchy*), by tagging the opposition with a crime or statement that renders everything else academic (so and so's a class warrior, a lib'rrrul, a blame America first liberal, a limousine liberal...

* People engage in gross dichotomization (not even us vs them, but US vs THEM!).

* People develop rhetorical strategies based on their status as sufferers of oppression and forbid anyone else to speak on their issue lest that person be called a racist, sexist, homophobe...).

* People even use nasty little typographical tricks—we've all seen the italicized innuendo or the use of snarling quotation marks—almost a politically correct version of Dr. Evil: "literature" placed in the "canon" favors dead white males.

Put another way: the intolerance of ideologues has done much to harm civility and both the far left and the far right have learned to attack one another so savagely and at times mindlessly that meaningful dialogue, as Martin Luther King called for, seems close to impossible. One consequence, of course, is the general feeling that everyone's full of...well, Princeton philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt's book says it all: *Bullshit*. But history can't be bullshit. Nor can the teaching of history or literature...not if historians and literature teachers want to have any kind of credibility or influence in an increasingly technological and materialistic culture that finds old institutions more obstructions to novel progress than protectors of civilization. Modifying a statement by George Washington...if reasonable people fail to reclaim the center, if we fail to discipline our ideologues, the resulting superficiality and emptiness we shall have no one to blame but ourselves.

I would like to encourage students to be mindful as Buddha wants them to be and to be critical as Golding wants them to be, and I want students to love history and literature. Ultimately, probably most teachers want their students to be independent, compassionate, self-governing, principled, thoughtful human beings.

So, here are a few things I'm considering in answering questions like, What happens when students dismiss historical figures like George Washington as unworthy of consideration because of a transgression, error, or even a crime? These are speculations and reflections, so no one reading this should assume I'm lecturing, pontificating, or in any way assuming I have the answers or am in any way superior to people with other approaches.

* Don't deny the legitimacy of grievances or complaints. If a person of color says that GW's ownership of slaves is painful or despicable, what could be more likely to kill dialogue or close doors than to deny the claim and begin lecturing on the discriminations thoughtful people need to make? Better, I think, to acknowledge and dignify the complaint as a respectful listener. And as the person talks, I want to encourage exploration of feelings and ideas. I've found that a person whose dignity is respected is more likely to be open to further and deeper exploration of concepts and feelings. Someone who seems bitter or hateful is not likely to benefit from confrontation or reprimands. A lot of good can be accomplished in a classroom over time, as people get to know one another and gain respect for alternative viewpoints. Further, it seems to me that a good teacher will try to help a given student explore and develop his or her thinking. The teacher who believes he must save the student from his or her own stupidity, ignorance, or folly may well be a little too biased or insecure to be of real help. People change. Their thinking evolves. The challenge to a teacher probably is not to pull some kind of amazing Robin Williams stunt that leads to a convenient (and shallow) Aha moment. Rather, a good teacher ought to help the student develop whatever thesis or philosophy the student espouses...as the student examines it, with some scaffolding or gentle assistance, s/he will find ways to create the kinds of increasingly sophisticated schemas or models independent people need to thrive in the world. It may sound soft or wimpy, but nurturing and nudging can do a lot more than manipulating or baiting. This applies, I'm saying, to controversial issues, to perceptions that are dearly held and which can be the source of pain or anger when not treated respectfully.

On the other end, it's hard to see how teachers help students understand history—and I assume an understanding of history is the number one prerequisite to meaningful participation in a complex culture—by a. trying to make history cool to kids by implying something like, yeah, my eighth grade boys, that Washington was a pimp (he may have been...baaadasssss, but trying to make GW an Arnold in powdered hair or Tupac who became the Man or whatever seems pretty suspect to me, as I'm sure it does to the instructor of the institute, P-Gibby [just kidding]), or b. trying to curry favor with children by trivializing the accomplishments of what used to be called heroes—many Americans do, as has been pointed out in the institute, love sanctimony: how does it promote insight or understanding? How does it lead to the power to genuinely witness human suffering or tragedy?

* Empathy is a key to success in all relationships. I want to encourage people to do some paraphrasing during discussions, especially when the topic is controversial. Teacher modeling of this practice is efficacious. Hand in

hand with empathy, use of metaphor can promote understanding over acrimony. Example: I may not be able to look out the same window as a person of color (lens/glass metaphor), but I can look out a window of the same house.

* Graphic organizers can be helpful in gaining insights and appreciation. Mind maps can help students actually see multiple concepts or characteristics, and a decent teacher can help students make connections. The chalkboard is still a good teaching tool. Some teachers I know like to have high school students create picture books to show their understanding of a text (fiction or biography). Creativity promotes reflection and may lead to appreciation, discovery, insight.

* If it's true that humans are gregarious and that we need other people to think and to understand (Vygotsky, Bakhtin, even Tom Wolfe come to mind), then in some ways there is nothing more important in a classroom than the interactions between the teacher and the student:::students:::and then student:::student:::students :::students. This institute has emphasized George Washington's integrity, his character, his proper concern with reputation. That's good stuff for all teachers to consider. I supposed there are a lot of definitions for the word *hero*, but I think we too rarely consider what heroic work is done daily by good teachers interacting with young people. Some students believe that all opinions are equally valid, that no judgments are possible. (It's usually not profitable to point out that such a stand is both opinionated and judgmental.) Someone has to stand for civility, common sense, virtue. And my experience is that students respect a teacher that stands for something more than one who can't seem to take a stand on anything. Nothing is more wonderful about the art of teaching than well managed discussions. A talk rich environment is desirable, so the engineering of meaningful small and large group discussions is critical to a class's success. I believe in challenging opinions and questioning assumptions. I do not believe in diminishing others or acting in a condescending manner--while pretending to give a damn--when I don't agree with a student. Students grow when they have to think hard, construct arguments, examine evidence, and so on. When a topic is personally painful for a student, a confrontational style is counterproductive.

* A sense of humor can break tension. Most students seem to respond well to a combination of good humor and genuine (not fawning, not oily, not insincere) respect. Of course, it's a damn fool that makes a wounding remark and hides behind humor.

* George Washington was a first-rate listener. Teachers should be great listeners. Too many teachers seem to think

all conversation must be filtered through the teacher. Or that the teacher must evaluate or comment on every statement. If I can (and I am damned far from being a great teacher), I want to help students get into a healthy, vigorous, stimulating discussion...and get out of their way. James Marshall of the University of Iowa has studied classroom conversations for years. He times everyone's speeches, and he says that even in classes where the teacher is reputed to be a great discussion leader, the teacher does a LOT of the talking.

* The Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee is now home to the Civil Rights Museum. There is a very large room inside in which the story of the Civil Rights movement is told using pictures and captions. One is struck by the changes: black folk fighting for rights...women (womyn?)...Latins... farm workers... Indians ...Asians...gays... handicapped people... It's amazing. People long ignored or marginalized expect equality. The person who argues against equality is swimming against an irresistible historical river. (You know, Martin Luther King is a hero...Bull Connor is a thug.) I would expect a healthy classroom to be inclusive. I think there will be more problems if students of traditionally ignored groups do not regularly see evidence that they are valued and respected. We want to study George Washington. We also need to study Olaudah Equiano. And we should not do what some "progressive" (notice the snotty ""?) people do: give youngsters the idea that people who looked like them didn't do much but get ****ed throughout history. American Indians didn't just get handed small pox blankets and die in massacres. They also gave the world some of the most important foods we have, great stories (through orature), a powerful sense of the spiritual, and models of patriotism and heroism.

* If I'm the teacher and I am pretty well read, thoughtful, compassionate, and principled, I am in a better position to confront fears, doubts, mistrust, anger, pain, and apathy, because--with each--I'm trying to feel it and honor it, dignify it and heal it. I believe that we ought to bring things into the light of day. Good ideas and great people transcend space and time. Sloppy thinking and small souls wither like little vampires in the sunlight of humble exploration of truth and meaning.

* And then there is writing. Writing is thinking, and many useless confrontations can be avoided or minimized by having students spend time on expressive or reflective writing. I sometimes use tape-ins (give students a short writing assignment that can be taped into a journal--then have them do some free writing or some guided writing [for a short while I'm prompting or reflecting aloud as they write--and I tell them to ignore me if they are on to something for I'm just trying to spark some thinking]), and I believe I

could come up with problems, issues, scenarios re: controversial issues or propositions. I may even encourage people to take adversarial stands or to come up with counterarguments to what are really PC propositions. Writing can help students clarify thoughts and feelings so that discussions are more profitable. I want students to do their own thinking, but then, I also want them to push past Golding's Grade 2, and that requires adult assistance and encouragement. I like to have students exchange journals or writing assignments and I coach them through written responses. We may do oral responses, too. Again, we're really after three things: hard thinking by the individual, healthy conversations between people, and the acquisition or building of thinking/speaking/writing strategies that will serve the student well as an active participant in this culture.

We are what we think. With our thoughts we make our world. The miserable pc person (on the right or the left) who walks around determined to be offended or set on simplistic answers will triumph over people too weak to be principled or too foolish to be compassionate. And the culture wars will go on and on. We are what we think. If I think I am principled, compassionate, honest, sensitive, and loving...am I? Others will tell me. Time will prove me.

No one lives without impulses that are degrading or dehumanizing or distressing. Those little demons of fear, doubt, anxiety, mistrust and so on thrive or linger as long as we interact with people who do not think like us. It is up to each person to gain ascendancy over our nastier passions, to cultivate that pure mind Buddha celebrates. It's inevitable that students will say things I believe to be thoughtless, petty, mean, stupid, arrogant, sexist, racist, homophobic... How I handle what is said is, as Epictetus said, my challenge. If I can speak with a pure mind, I will affirm the humanity without sanctioning the transgression. I hope that any student in my class—black, white, Latino, Asian, American Indian, gay—feels welcome, respected, valued, trusted, safe enough to do what we're supposed to do in school: think our way through issues and problems, test hypotheses, discover insights, understand principles, prepare to be responsible citizens in a complex, multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural society with the most admirable values (as written by that old slaver and womanizer Thomas Jefferson) ever put on paper and proclaimed to largely antidemocratic world, but a world which is, as Fareed Zacharia has pointed out, moving increasingly in the direction first pointed out so long ago by those Waspy old white fellows in Philadelphia.

One of the many things I've learned at this institute is that truly great humans grow, change, evolve. As has been said, GW usually manages to win people over—he had such

character and integrity that he kept trying to do the right thing and he kept discovering what the right thing really was.

To be an American is to walk a road of paradoxes. We claim to love life but we are the only country that regularly sends in warplanes to bomb those who...uh, need to be bombed. Go to a Lynyrd Skynyrd concert and you will see the long haired boys whoopin' it up for America while blending a CSA flag into the image of Old Glory. We are scandalized by a (well, almost) naked breast at the Superbowl but have no problem with aging jocks like the venerable Mike Ditka explaining the advantages of this or that erection pill. (Really, which would frighten children more? Janet Jackson's breast or the image of Ditka with a high mast...?) We hear people regularly shout that they want government off their backs...but they are pleased with the pork their politicians bring home to build roads, parks, lakes--and in GOP Senator Grassley's case, rain forests in Iowa. We say we are trying to improve education, but some states use third grading reading schools to project prison space needs. And we send some people to prison longer for growing marijuana than for committing murder.

James Alan McPherson--first African American to win the Pulitzer for fiction, teacher at the University of Iowa's Writer's Workshop--discussed in his essay "On Becoming an American Writer," Albion Tourgee who argued in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) that the Fourteenth Amendment changed everything, and that because of it, there ought to be a new model for citizenship. McPherson says that Tourgee proposed "that each United States citizen would attempt to approximate the ideals of the nation, be on at least conversant terms with all its diversity, carry the mainstream of the culture inside himself." Such a citizen is going to have to deal with paradoxes, ironies, contradictions. Such a citizen is going to have to have--for example--knowledge of the Christian far right's belief that it is being persecuted, and knowledge of the anger and resentment expressed in gangsta rap.

We are a diverse nation. And no one can be comfortable just reading or hearing people that confirm his or her own ideology or prejudices. As teachers...we have to be out front in helping young minds confront the truth or truths of the past as well as the present, or how will they meet a complex and frightening future?

Chris Rock appeals to a lot of people even though he says offensive and wild things. I've heard him say that he "hates niggers," that black people "hate white people," and so on. He offers many criticisms of America. And then he says, very sincerely, that America is the greatest country in the world and that there is no where else he'd rather

live. What a paradox. But then, why not? The freedom to rip the country one loves—to use the language of youth—rocks. And—pardon the religious language—thank God we've always had our share of boat rockers and hell raisers.

And if students can appreciate the paradoxes of a gifted African American comedian, perhaps they can appreciate the contradictions in a grand old white man named George.

--Bill Mitchell