

Danville News Column
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“Celebrating Mediocrity”
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A college professor confided how she had difficulty grading term papers her students submitted. None bothered to paginate the papers. The professor asked them why didn't they? To a student, they answered that she didn't tell them to number the pages. It wasn't in her instructions.

It's not a matter of hoping they'll go the extra mile. Why do we have to tell people to do the normal? I know why. We've trained them to be dependent, docile. They've accepted being pets. They like others responsible for their success or happiness.

With the big problems we need to solve these days, we could use more oblique, adventurous, independent creative thinking. Here's where our schools may be failing us, for ready-made answers are as nutritious as eating paste in preschool. There is too starched a diet of standardized testing, standardized slogans, standardized answers, standardized stories. I fear schools prefer automatons over students. School administrators confuse requiring obedience with fostering self-discipline. Sure, great artists learn to paint by first imitating the masters, but only so they can create their own works.

Begin by taking any problem, and, free from pre-judgment and suffocating criticism, imagine a dozen ways to solve it

When they wanted to build a Suspension Bridge over the Niagara, they couldn't figure out how to stretch the cable across the wide, turbulent gorge. Shoot a cannon ball? Tow the cable across on a steamer? Launch a rocket? Then the engineer got an idea. He promised to award \$5 to the first boy who could fly a kite across the gorge. The boy who succeeded crossed the river upstream by ferry and flew his kite from the Canadian side, with the wind at his back. Then a heavier line was attached to the kite string. It was pulled across, followed by succeeding heavier lines until the main cable.

Sappy schools and shallow stories imprint conclusions we expect them to digest, for their own good of course. Worse, we damage our children when we force-feed visuals at an age before they have the faculties to process the message. The zombies might not be the characters inside the video game but those playing the video game. Fewer electronics and less social media please. More cafes, museums, conversation, salons, strolls.

You might be surprised at how our culture has rewritten the classic fairy tales so they, like banal TV sit-coms, invariably have a happy ending. Read the originals. The Piggy who built his house of brick boils the wolf. The Little Mermaid chooses death rather than stab the Prince she loves.

Since when does life always have a happy ending?

This celebration of mediocrity is something my church is examining as we re-evaluate how we teach the Bible. Much of children's religious literature misleads, harms. Last spring we studied the Book of Jonah. Jonah was a pain. Jonah shirked responsibilities. Jonah pouted and whined when God decided to love and forgive a nation Jonah despised. Jonah's pathetic. So how come half of children's books paint him heroic?

An extra hazard is that howsoever much information we may boast today, what good is it if we lack a moral core? Intelligence never is enough. We can be clever but not terribly smart. We may be intelligent enough to know how to drive a car, but not smart enough to know you don't drive a Porsche 140 mph after drinking all night. Pathetic Jackass.

We humans are more than animals trapped by instinct and appetite, more than grunting, snarling beasts lacking self-awareness, lacking self-reflection. We can rise above base, self-serving instinct. With a moral imagination we become free to create what is humane and beneficial as opposed to what is demeaning and cruel. We can decide between that which will cheapen and degrade and that which will ennoble and inspire. I weary of those who create something for the sake of showing off or in an attempt to one-up someone else; then they step back, saying, "Uh-oh, what have we just done?"

There is Art and Beauty that endures versus what a witty Nun once termed 'newspaper art.' It is all art, but some art endures the ages, whilst some lasts until you need to put something down on the bottom of the birdcage. Rembrandt or Andy Warhol? Ernie Kovacs or Howard Stern? Brubeck or Britney? Those who reach for the stars or those who slouche on the couch munching potato chips? Polio vaccines or mustard gas? Renoir or Penthouse magazine?

You are what you imagine.