

“Anybody can lecture.”
The Danville News
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May 20, 2021
“Here There Be Tygers”
Word Count: 750

Semesters are ending, punctuating this quixotic school year. Graduation is around the corner. Baccalaureate too. Grades soon will be calculated (do grades really reflect learning?). What better way to spend the final weeks of the Danville School District than with Keystone Testing, May 17-21, 24-28. What are the Keystone Exams? The “Keystone Exams are end-of-course assessments designed to assess proficiency in the subject areas of Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry, Literature, English Composition, Biology, Chemistry, U.S. History, World History, and Civics and Government.”

Define proficiency, please. How are these Keystones assessed? By approved information? By Cyber Ninjas? We better make sure, lest students fail to fit what’s expected. The joke is that standardized tests look for standardized answers. Let’s pound round kids into square holes. This works with algebra, maybe. Interpretation of literature, composition, civics, and history is another story, quite literally. Our daughter wrote a paper on a poem. Her high school teacher told her that her interpretation was wrong. Assembly-line teacher then told her the correct interpretation. Really? Myself trained to teach secondary education English, I thought teaching helped students learn how to think, never what to think. Anybody can lecture. The talent is in asking right questions so students can clarify issues, uncover answers, and reach their own conclusions and convictions.

In the play, “Inherit the Wind,” defense attorney, Henry Drummond, is challenged to say if he considers anything holy: “Yes. The individual human mind. In a child's power to master the multiplication table, there is more sanctity than in all your shouted ‘amens’ and ‘holy holies’ and ‘hosannas.’ An idea is a greater monument than a cathedral. And the advance of man's knowledge is a greater miracle than all the sticks turned to snakes or the parting of the waters.”

God bless the anointed ones – “proofreaders of the human spirit” -- who know exactly what everyone else should think. Should we pin badges on society’s ‘thought police,’ those so afraid of people using their minds they insist on litmus tests for correct thinking? But why would we want to imitate the Taliban, arbiters of everyone else’s morality, behavior, and ideas? Republicans often criticize higher education for thought policing, sometimes rightly so. Yet why are they eliminating members for truth-telling? The Twilight Zone episode, “The Obsolete Man,” (about a librarian) reminds us that to every totalitarian fascist state, “logic is an enemy and truth a menace.”

Let’s avoid confusing unity with conformity. Let’s avoid confusing fact and knowledge with opinion. Education spells freedom. Please explain the spew of vicious Taliban-esque social media nonsense undermining science, history, forbidding information or twisting or sugarcoating reality. Can the USA stand upon sands of falsehoods.

What other pandemics infect our nation? How about a dearth of critical thinking, a cowardice toward evaluating opinions and feelings, an absence of intellectual honesty, rigor, curiosity, resulting in cynical rejection of fundamental knowledge? Some voices assert that the values and principles of Western Civilization are under attack. I like Western Civilization. I’m a product of Western Civilization. Useful would be if those who argue that Western Civilization is under siege would recommend the books they

believe best exemplifying the principles and values of Western Civilization. Which classics? Are we so insecure that we fear contributions from other perspectives?

While we're at it, could we define what we mean by Western Civilization? That might help. Likewise, we hear complaints about socialism. Would someone define what they mean by socialism? Does it include Social Security? What is the purpose of government? What does the slogan America First imply? Perhaps: "War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength." I already have two big brothers telling me what to do. I don't need any more. We also could benefit from a tutorial in what democracy means. Clarifying our terms is worth an intelligent, informed, disinterested conversation. Who's interested?

Do you think any of the works of author Ray Bradbury were studied in preparation for the Keystones? "Here There be Tygers," is one of his shrewdest short stories, the title taken from medieval maps where cartographers wrote, in ignorance, dire warnings to explorers. The earth spaceship lands on an unexplored planet – Planet 7 of star system 84. The corporate representative, Chatterton, views the planet as a hostile enemy to exploit. The rocket men, keeping open minds, trust the planet as a friend eager to share its bounty. Chatterton finds what he expects. The planet, despite numerous warnings, gives him tygers. You tend to find what you expect to find.