

National Post

Plato and poetry for the poor: Vancouver program

Sat Jul 15 2000

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Section: Review

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Source: National Post

Illustrations: Black & White Photo: Mark Van Manen, Vancouver Sun / Am Johal, left, was inspired by Earl Shorris, right, to start a version of Humanities 101 in Vancouver.

Black & White Photo: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun / Students share a laugh as Humanities 101 class at UBC gets underway.

At the Ovaltine Cafe on East Hastings, in the heart of Vancouver's skid row, an unusual conversation is going on. Most of the diners in the chipped wooden booths are old, lonely men drinking 90 cents coffee, discussing weekend plans with the waitress, or tattooed young men slurring over \$3 beers. Andrew Sharpe however, a clean-cut neighbourhood resident, is discussing "organic intellectuals."

The concept, says Sharpe, attributed to the Italian political theorist, Antonio Gramsci, refers to people who teach from experience, as opposed to those who teach ideas they only know in theory. Gramsci, a 4-foot-2 hunchback imprisoned by Mussolini for his political views, said that the way to develop community leaders and teachers was through culture: art, philosophy, literature. Culture, said Gramsci, has the capacity to transform people. It has certainly transformed Sharpe.

About five years ago, the 44-year-old Sharpe lost his way and ended up living in a run-down hotel with a kitchen in his bathroom and an income of less than \$7,000 a year, in a neighbourhood with the highest rate of HIV infection and the poorest postal code in the country. But through culture, through studying the humanities in particular, Sharpe has

emerged from his neighbourhood a different person. Six months ago, Sharpe was sitting here in the Ovaltine Cafe with Earl Shorris, the New York author of the upcoming book, *Riches for the Poor: the Clemente Course in the Humanities*. They shared lemon meringue pie and talked about Shorris' experimental course, Humanities 101, a version of which has been set up in Vancouver and twenty-five other cities across North America.

According to Shorris's book, which will be published in August, the idea for the course began with a woman he met in a New York state prison. Upon asking her why she thought people were poor, Viniece Walker, an HIV-positive high school drop out, said: "You have to start with the children. You have to teach the moral life of downtown to the children." By that she meant a moral alternative to the street where children could have access to urban cultural institutions such as the theatre, opera, lectures, things that provide an opportunity to reflect.

Shorris says the goal of the Clemente course was to help the poor become "political," not in the electoral sense but in the way Pericles used the word: to mean activity with other people at every level, from the family to the neighbourhood to

the city. He designed a course that would teach underprivileged students philosophy, poetry, history, logic, enlisting a faculty that students might encounter in their first year at Harvard or Yale.

For the Vancouver program, held at the University of British Columbia, fourteen university professors and instructors volunteer to teach anthropology, gender studies and poetry, courses that vary from Shorris's curriculum in that they aren't just the straight classics, says Clint Burnham, the academic coordinator.

The program was started three years ago by two University of British Columbia graduate students, Am Johal and Allison Dunnet.

So far, 60 students have completed the course, out of about 75 who started.

In September, another eight-month course will begin and six former graduates of the course will attend UBC as full-time mature students. Sharpe included.

"When you look at how Plato thought about the dialectic," he says, sipping his tea, "It deals with bringing the education out of people, rather than teaching them."

That's part of the reason, he says, the course has worked. It is an exchange of knowledge between students, teachers and the ancient philosophers.

Sharpe never finished high school. After five years of living hand to mouth on a welfare check that, minus the \$325 in rent, left him with only \$6 a day, he still has no kitchen. But thanks to the Clemente course, he has a new perspective on life, employment as a busboy in an upscale,

beachfront restaurant, and a second, part-time job recruiting students for next year's humanities course.

For Sharpe, learning things like Plato and Shakespeare has felt like "a guilty pleasure." He says Clemente taught him that everyone is unique and can contribute to society. "That's not nurtured down here," he says. "But it was in class."

Funded by UBC and the provincial government, the Vancouver course provides 25 students a term with a bus pass, a meal before each class, child care and a student card that allows them access to the computer room, the library and the recreation facilities. They also occasionally receive free donated tickets for cultural outings to the opera, the art gallery or the museum of anthropology.

Jim Green, CEO of the Four Corners Bank, which offers accounts and loans to poor people, teaches at UBC. He says he never thought he would see his Clemente students coming out of the opera Tosca, singing and heatedly discussing how Tosca killed the Roman police chief who tortured her boyfriend. The opera was such a success, Green now has opera companies come into the bank every few months to perform arias, free, in the lobby.

After one such performance, Green was approached by a tall, well-built man with a beat up face.

He said, "Are you the f--ing guy who runs the f--ing bank? And Green said, "Ya." And he said, "Are you the f--ing guy who put on the f--ing opera?" And Green said, "Ya." And he said, "Well, when are you going to have another f--ing opera, man? Let's get some more f--ing opera down

here."

Green was thrilled. "It's not what you know but what you're capable of learning," he said. "Once you have challenges and make that conquest," he says, "it changes your life completely."

That's what happened to Deborah Preston. On an early and warm summer morning, she is sitting outside a coffee shop with a group of graduates from the Clemente Course. This is where they come, when they can, to keep in touch with the friends they have made through the course. Some are part of Sharpe's running club and they stop here after their daily morning jog.

"The unexamined life is not worth living," says Preston, quoting Socrates over her morning coffee. That was her life before the Humanities course - "just out there trying to get a job, checking flyers for a sale, seeing is there's something on TV and before you know it, you're 85 and it's over and you haven't asked yourself enough questions."

Now Preston is full of questions. "Plato helps you ask those questions," she says. "Why am I here? What happens after? If you don't ask yourself those questions, you're living a half lived, half life."

Hegel, on the other hand, she sighs and puts her head on the table. "I suggest they pass joints to anyone who has to study him," she says, then adds, quickly: "I don't do joints."

(Drugs are a sensitive subject for those involved in Humanities 101, ever since a Vancouver Sun reporter wrote that one student had left the class for a fix. Burnham and others deny this was true. "The people

with drug and alcohol problems didn't show up messed up," said one former student who was in that class. The classroom is now off limits to the media.) Sitting beside Preston, Paul St-Germain, another graduate of the course, flips through a local paper, admiring a painting on the cover.

St-Germain has arrived at the cafe this morning after running 10 km with Sharpe. St-Germain says he didn't like the course whatsoever. "They're teaching us how to lie and cheat through learning how to manipulate others," he says, noting that he rejects Plato's allegory of the cave.

"The person in the cave," he says, "only knew the shadows and when he found out that the shadows weren't real, it drove him crazy. All these years, stuck in a cave, chained up, looking at figures on the wall. It wasn't what he thought it was. It's mind manipulation. It's cruel. I know the point was that everything is an illusion, but I don't believe that. There's some reality to it."

St-Germain, smoking a hand-rolled cigarette, his hand shaking slightly, continues: "They brainwashed him. They made him suffer to find out some stupid ass theory that doesn't mean anything to him. Plato is selfish. He never had to dig the trenches. He never knew anything. He never lived hard, never lived on the street, to fight for a living. He never had to starve. I have starved many days."

But St-Germain is an anomaly: Other students say Clemente has changed their lives. Sharpe brings up a poem taught in class, "The Lovers of the Poor" by black Chicago poet Gwendolyn Brooks. A poem about white charity ladies going into

Chicago's South Side tenements with gloves on, and their revulsion at the poverty they encounter, Sharpe says it helped him see there is a kind of servitude in his own backyard.

"People get beaten down in this neighbourhood," he says. "To access services, you have to wait in line. You're treated more like a case number, not an individual."

Burnham, the academic coordinator who also teaches poetry and cultural studies, taught Brooks' poem. "People made the connections with poetry," he said. "They said it reminded them of the soup kitchen at Christmas." The ladies in the poem, like the volunteers at the soup kitchen, he said, come to help with an abstract idea of helping the poor but when it comes to actually doing it, it can offend their sensibilities.

Burnham says the classroom experience of Humanities 101 comes off well "compared to the bitching of grad students." The students in Humanities 101 are there because they've chosen to be there not because they are forced by their parents. They don't take the classes for granted, he says, and they bring with them a life experience unparalleled in any undergraduate class.

"The program is about providing knowledge, but it's also about them providing knowledge and those things come together in some interesting, unpredictable ways."

Out of the sixty graduates of the Clemente course in Vancouver, one now works with a theatre company, another with the opera. One is a mental health counsellor and

another ran for city council. Then there are those, like Sharpe, attending colleges and universities in the fall.

Not so for Preston. Chronically underemployed, Preston is about to head off to two job interviews for clerical work.

"We're like the chimney sweeps of society," she says, "and we're made to know it."

But one of her philosopher teachers told her what you do is not who you are. "You can't imagine the comfort in those words," she said. "I hugged them all the way home."

USING THE SOCRATIC METHOD TO TEACH

In his forthcoming book, *Riches for the Poor*, which grew out of an article he wrote for Harper's magazine in 1997, Earl Shorris describes his theory of poverty and why the Clemente course appears to work. Shorris's premise is that the uneducated poor have neither the economic nor the intellectual resources to take their fair share of power. Their access to higher education is inhibited by what Shorris calls "the surround of force," the numerous factors -- hunger, landlords, isolation -- that exert themselves on the poor and leave them feeling trapped.

The Clemente Course, named after the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center, the lower Manhattan facility that housed the first class, is not necessarily the answer to poverty, Shorris says. But at the very least, the course provides "a moral alternative to the street." And it provides many students with the impetus to carry on with their education.

Shorris describes a telephone conversation he has with a student who has called to tell him about a problem he had at work. He listens, expecting bad news: "Mister Shores, there's a woman at my job, she said some things to me and I said some things to her. And she told my supervisor I had said things to her and he called me in about it. She's 40 years old and she don't have no social life, and I have a good social life, and she's jealous of me."

"And then what happened?" asks Shorris.

"She made me so mad, I wanted to smack her up against the wall. I tried to talk to some friends to calm myself down a little, but nobody was around."

"And what did you do?," asks Shorris.

"Mister Shores, I asked myself, 'What would Socrates do?'"

His student used Socratic reasoning to realize that his co-workers envy was not his problem and controlled his rage.

"The Humanities teach people to think," said Shorris. "They teach people to appreciate beauty and reason and give people the ability to think critically. But mostly what the Humanities do is teach people that there are always beginnings."

The course, says Shorris, has been as much a learning experience for the faculty as for the students. Among the things Shorris has taken away from the course: a new appreciation for Antigone based on the experience of a woman in Bedford Hills prison where he taught a Clemente course. His student had turned her own daughter in to the FBI. "The conflict between loyalty to

family and the state was real in her life," said Shorris. "Until then, I had understood the play from an intellectual distance."

The course also clarified for him Aristotle's idea of the *vita activa*, of being at the beginning of something. "The study of the humanities, the enjoyment of the humanities, is also the *vita activa*, a beginning, an initiation of thinking and feeling," he said.

For the faculty, the Clemente Course has provided them with the best students most of them will ever have. Using the Socratic method of dialogue, rather than lecture, the experience of teaching the classics to the poor, has been an experience richer than even Shorris expected.

"It has not changed my own views," he said, "but I have much greater tolerance for people who hold different opinions ... [it] has made a better citizen out of me."

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