

**SLEEPY HOLLOW The Headless Romance**

by

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The debate over educational 'standards' is a flash point for each parental generation as it contemplates what the prevalent standards have done to its youth, or rather who in that generation should have known better! I know when my age group got to university in the sixties most of our professors were appalled at what they had to contend with — across the board. The rot had apparently set in some time ago, and we were the result. As I recall, well over a third of the freshman class flunked their year.

By the late seventies, standards themselves were coming under scrutiny and professional educators were more and more convinced that all so-called standards were hopelessly misleading — didn't account for a child's natural talents. Obviously I had, through a quirk of time, encountered the last of the 'dead beat' pedagogues. But by then it was too late, my degree reluctantly dispensed by a latterly stoic university.

By the late Eighties the debate was pretty well over. And the professors of the fifties and early sixties retired or dead. The CBC's Centerpoint of November 25, 1991, revealed the growing certainty of the double domes, who maintained that comparative nationalized testing was in essence a nuisance, and a punishment devised by conservative parental ogres —who, apropos Oscar Wilde's pronouncement on relatives, "Had't the remotest idea how to live nor the slightest idea when to die." I made some notes at the time of the Centerpoint discussions. I've been reluctant to trash them. Said one veteran Edmonton high school teacher who, we were informed, was sincere, friendly, encouraging, and very committed to both his students and his profession,

“I disapprove of the whole concept of standardized testing — no connection whatsoever between national testing and improving educational standards.” No connection whatsoever. The imputation being that so-called education standards are, in effect, illusionary, a concept the committed educator usually ignores when his own expertise is questioned. His proficiency and tenure are unimpeachable.

It seems the teachers' worry was that they might unfairly be held accountable for their students preparedness, such students being too variable in background and ability, we were told, to be comparatively measured, due to the pluralistic ethnic and ethos mix of a mosaic population. Hence the accusation of political meddling — the intrusive obsession with numbers and rank. Again, quoting the Edmonton teacher: “I think what we're engaging in here is a political exercise rather than a pedagogical exercise.”

Next we were told that you can learn to appreciate something without having to acquire many facts or details; that you can ‘appreciate’ mathematics and literature while not being able to remember much of what you read, or make much sense of the numbers before you. Said another dedicated educator when asked about this: “I guess a love of literature isn't an instantaneous ah measurable item...we're not dealing with a product that you can measure in 1000th of an inch clearance. Things don't register instantly (with children) and become measurable.” (I have the feeling this educator, as a teenager, breezed through shop.) Well, what about a 10th of an inch, and instead of ‘instantly, the day after tomorrow, say? It is fairly well known that children absorb a lot — can pick up the rudiments of a second language in about ten weeks, for instance. Moreover, there simply is no way one can determine what's been duly acquired except to look in on the student say ten years hence. In short, you have to take the ‘experts’ —

who abjure comparative standards, a measure of expertise — word for it.

As resolute was the attitude of some parents, one of whom, a seer as it turned out, exclaimed, “Who’s setting these institutional standards? And who cares! I care about this child which is mine, in this context, in this community, in this country, and I honestly think that first of all the idea of there being a way to evaluate on an international basis is, is so (a pause for the right word) *bankrupt* as an idea to me. I know that globalization is a reality, and I’m going to try to protect my kids for as long as I can from that globalization.”

Well, reality or not, that mother of three young children may discover in her lifetime how bankrupt Canada can become.

What was positively serene was the conviction with which the educational elite then ‘intuited’ education — as if it were so elusive as to defy identification. A Professor of Education and former chairman of a Board of Education said the following: “I wish just half the energy could be spent on whata we want out of the schools, and it comes before the testing and the kind of top down technical models imported from General Motors what there’s no attempt to, to look at creativity to value ah individuals and their progress, and we had parents saying, lookit, my youngster’s attitude toward mathematics is far more important than the mark on a report card.” — An exact verbal transcript. True, speech is more fluent and less bruising cognitively, yet discrete symbols (words) and syntax reveal the mind. When asked about the benefit of lovingly coming up with wrong or indeterminate answers, the Professor said: “Well, it can keep you at it. You can be mathematicians like, like I was where I did enjoy it, I did like it. I never was a great mathematicians marks wise.” Again an exact transcript, from an educator with a PhD.

The conviction at the time was ineluctable. (‘Dad, don’t get me wrong, eh, mathematics is mint stuff but don’t spoil it by testing me,

okay?' 'Wouldn't think of it son.')

The debate continues. Yet has the purpose of education ever been that elusive? One must learn how to live and how to make a living, and making a living is linked to more than just 'expressiveness'. You can teach yourself many things if you know some mathematics and can read. And the texts you read are usually created by people who know more than you do. How one learns.

One of the students put it in a nutshell: "If we only get to put a few of our notes into a test, why bother making all the rest?"

Well, if all is ever said and partly done, the exiguous fact may be that interest itself is as much a matter of nostalgia (experience over time) as innate curiosity, and habit the nub of application, for application requires routine as well as desire — desire often being, after all, quixotic. Being 'interested in everything' is as symptomatic of being interested in nothing much at all over time.

At the outset of this piece I mentioned a handful of my early professors who were resigned to teaching students unprepared for their classes — students who, in general, should have known more than they did according to a lingering norm. A few years ago I came across a document — a primary document, an historian would gratifyingly say — that sheds some light on that assessment. A sturdy mathematics text that both my brother and I laboured over in our high school years: Ontario High School Algebra by J.T. Crawford, Macmillan, 1947. Same text, same teacher in our high school, nearly identical classrooms, similarly mannered student body — many intervening variables were thus controlled for. Yet my sainted brother, six years my senior, was assigned (I could tell by the pen marks he made in his own copy of the text) more difficult problems than I, and more of them. In the course of six years the same teacher had decided to make easier demands on his students. For the same matriculation certificate.

A further development occurred within these six years: the advent of the 'recommendation' system, whereby a student who did well on his fall midterm, Christmas and Easter examinations, was exempted having to write a final examination, and got out of school a fortnight earlier.

Now a final exam is not indispensable in and of itself, but the preparation for it, the careful review of an entire year's work, helps log a few facts and ideas that are otherwise likely to fade from memory or be forgotten much sooner. One of my fellow students, who was recommended, had an ambitious parent who wanted a scholarship for her son, attainable only to those who wrote the 'finals'. Well, my friend was not impressed by the challenge and managed to flunk all but a single exam. He did eventually matriculate but only after the strenuous intervention of his parent.

The above examples prove nothing on their own, but they are suggestive. I shall not soon forget the face of the first English professor I encountered, when seeking an explanation for a mark on an essay I thought low. It took him but a few seconds, glancing at my words, to suggest that I was exceedingly lucky to receive what I did. He then, with placid and excruciating thoroughness, explained why.

I never got over the imputation in his voice and manner that I had somehow let down the side. That I was not pulling my weight. Maybe even trying to steal a base. I'm sure I worked harder as a result, though I still wonder some days if many of us should have ever been at University in the first place — that maybe the mavens back then had a point.