

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1-A:

A THOUGHTFUL LOOK BACK AT “FOOD FOR THOUGHT 1”

ONE

You may remember that back in June of this year, I posted “Food for Thought 1” proposing that readers pretend to be editors of the four major papers that showed no interest in an Op-Ed piece I’d submitted—and give their own “reasons” for not printing the piece.

That long-ago “Food for Thought” ran under this heading:

**WHY DO YOU SUPPOSE *THE NEW YORK TIMES*
(AND *THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE*, AND *THE WALL
STREET JOURNAL* AND *THE PORTLAND OREGONIAN*)
SHOWED NO INTEREST
IN THIS OP-ED PIECE?**

And the piece went on like this:

“Back in early March of this year, 2006, I submitted the following op ed piece (though it’s shorter and trimmer now) to the *Times* and never heard a peep. Now, I know perfectly well that that’s the policy—if you don’t hear within a week, they don’t want the piece. Fair enough. But *why* do you suppose they weren’t interested? Or why do you suppose *The Chicago Tribune* wasn’t interested either, or *The Wall Street Journal*, or *The Portland Oregonian*?

“To me, it becomes a more and more interesting question. For the sake of argument, let’s assume that, at each paper, the piece really did get looked at and wasn’t simply orphaned and lost among the thousands of submissions that must flood into the

editors' offices all the time. Let's assume, in other words, that an editorial op ed staff member in each case picked it up, read it, and made a reasoned decision not to run it.

“What's interesting is: why *not* run it?”

“Here's a kind of brain-exercise. Imagine that you yourself were that editor at the *Times* or *Tribune* or *Journal* or *Oregonian*. What did *you* think about it? Did you hate the piece? Or did you like it, even love it, wish you could run it, but feel that you couldn't—and, of course, if you felt you “couldn't,” then why not? Was there something unsound about it? Something lacking? Something untrue? Or, well—was there something *embarrassing* about it? What *was* the reason?”

“If these questions interest you as they do me, and if you email me your “reasons” for rejecting the piece, and if those reasons are interesting or on the mark in some interesting and germane way, maybe I could post some of them here for our general observation and, maybe, discussion.

“By the way, I first wrote and submitted the piece in response to a *Times* editorial (February 26, 2006) under the title “Proof of Learning at College.” The question, raised by a current news item, was whether or not students really learn anything in college and, in order to find out, whether or not systems should be set up and installed for purposes of such measurement. The *Times* editorial concluded this way:

“Colleges and universities should join in the hunt for acceptable ways to measure student progress, rather than simply fighting the whole idea from the sidelines. Unless the higher education community wakes up to this problem—and resolves to do a better job—the movement aimed at regulating colleges and forcing them to demonstrate that students are actually learning will only keep growing.”

TWO

If you'd like to re-read my old op ed piece itself—“College is Too Late”—you can do it by clicking <http://www.ericlarsen.net/foodforthought1.html> here. Then come on back.

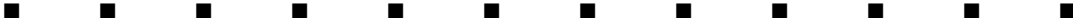
Because now we've got something new to talk about. A reader, Clifford V. Moravetz, has given some thought to my old question about “pretending to be” an editor, and he has put together an intelligent response to it, and an interesting one.

He and I have agreed that we'll post his piece here in the hope that other readers may find it thought-provoking and might respond to it in their own ways. All I can say is let's try it and see.

So, let us know what you think.

—EL

—December 26, 2006



SOME THOUGHTS ON “FOOD FOR THOUGHT 1”

I’m not sure just how to go about shaping my reaction to “Food For Thought 1,” mostly because it is so intertwined with my own intellectual journey through life. My initial reaction is that your “Food For Thought” is right on target; I really don’t disagree with you on any point. For some years now I’ve firmly believed that Reasoning should become the fourth R alongside Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic. In fact, when you wrote “That unless students are educated in the basics before they leave high school, college is guaranteed, for all but the tiniest few, to be a great and expensive waste of effort,” my initial reaction was “he’s put the bar too high; teaching critical thinking should start in grade school.” But I realized that I think you’re referring to other things than critical thinking, and, besides, you’re asking for these things to be as firmly in place as any other skill by the time high school is over, not just *taught* in high school.

The next reaction I had is that I feel as if I am one of those students who went through college, and specifically Freshman Composition, unchanged. I didn’t wake up intellectually until some time after college. There may be some reason to increase that 2% to 3% in your Op-Ed because you may have planted seeds that will grow up later.

As to why it didn’t get published, I can’t see anything lacking, untrue, or embarrassing in it. Instead, I’m inclined to wonder if it just didn’t fit in with the newspaper editors’ ideas of something worth printing. As other commentators have observed, Americans seem almost immune to introspection and seem almost paranoid about reflection and privateness. Your call to have Americans learn the slow, internal, and deep life of thoughtful readers just flies in the face of Americans and their preference for the quick, external, and shallow. No flash, no go.

I don’t know if you’re familiar with the work of John Taylor Gatto or not, but I read his *Underground History of American Education* about a year ago. It offers an explanation about why I hated school with such a passion, and yet I love to learn new things. It just seems a stretch to believe there’s a conspiracy on the part of government and industry that has turned us into what we are today. My reservations aside, I found many parts of his book compelling, such as his experiences growing up in a steel town on the Monongahela river and teaching grade school children *Moby Dick*. You may find his work interesting in light of your own work. Gatto places the start of the “Decline and Fall” of the United States in the late 19th century. He is also convinced that forced schooling is a part of our educational problems; only the people who want to learn should be in school.

capable of governing itself, of making sound decisions, and of restraining its worst impulses.

Just before those words, Puriefoy commented that “The success and survival of public education is essential to the success and survival of democracy and civil society in America. In fact, just as American democracy created public schools, one could say public schools have created America’s democracy.”

Successful education, then, is “essential” to the keeping of a democracy. We’re all in agreement on that particular—and indispensably important—point. The fearsome question is, however, whether it’s already too late, whether we’ve *already* “lost” our republic. <http://www.ericlarsen.net/foodforthought11.html>. “Food for Thought 11 Part One,” after all, and <http://www.ericlarsen.net/foodforthought11.2.html> “Food for Thought 11 Part Two,” ask whether or not, right now, at this very moment, a democratic republic *does* still exist in the U.S.

Puriefoy asserts that “Our public schools. . . enriched America in the past,” and she concludes by adding that they “can do so again.”

Is she right? *Can they?* Or how about the private ones? *Can they?* Or the colleges—how about *them*? Readers of *A Nation Gone Blind* know that I’m skeptical on every one of these questions—and yet what is it that brought Clifford Moravetz—and the other remarkable readers whom I’ve met through this web site—what is it that’s caused or allowed *them* to grow, flourish, and mature intellectually?

And a last thing. 1) If Moravetz is right that “[learning] the slow, internal, and deep life of thoughtful readers just flies in the face of Americans and their preference for the quick, external, and shallow”; and 2) if *five* major daily newspapers—on the east coast, in the midlands, and on the west coast—have no interest whatsoever in an Op-Ed piece that hopes to draw people’s attention to that fact in order that curatives can be found; doesn’t that mean, then, 3) that the mainstream media *does not want the situation to change*, or, at the very least, 4) is *prohibited from saying* that it wants change?

I close my lips. Let me and Clifford Moravetz know what you think.

—12/26/2006