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ARTICLE

Singing in Dark Times

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Bertolt Brecht raised a question in his poem “Motto”:

In dark times

Will there also be singing?

His answer:

Yes, there will be singing.

About the dark times.

Our work here and now is in part to sing the dark times. We begin by waking up, by opening our eyes to the reality before us, the beautiful and the hopeful no less than the difficult, the tragic, the ugly. We cannot separate our own lives from the concentric circles of context—historic flow and economic condition, political situation and cultural surround—that make them more fully understandable and meaningful.

Many have watched with anger and a gathering horror as the country has marched step-by-step toward a definitive authoritarianism:

- Empire resurrected in the name of a renewed and powerful patriotic nationalism.
- War without end.
- Identification of opaque and ill-defined enemies as a unifying cause.
- Unprecedented and unapologetic military expansion and militarism.
- White supremacy changing form but essentially intact and unyielding.
- Rampant sexism.
- Growing surveillance in every sphere of life.
- Mass incarceration and disenfranchisement.
- Entangling of religion with government.
- Growing disparities between the haves and have-nots on a global scale.
- The shredding of constitutional rights, the casual disregard for human rights, and the systematic hollowing out of democracy.
- Corporate power unchecked, the ideology of the “market” promoted as the only true expression of participatory democracy.
- Fraudulent elections.

- A steady drum-beat of “public secrets”—obvious lies issued by the powerful, like “We don’t torture,” whose purpose is both future deniability as well as evidence of power’s ability to have its way regardless of law or popular will.
- Disdain for the arts and for intellectual life.
- The creation of popular movements based on bigotry, intolerance and the threat of violence, and the scapegoating of certain targeted and vulnerable groups.

This is, of course, not the whole story, but it is without doubt a bright thread that is both recognizable and knowable.

It’s important here to make a distinction between personal virtue—be honest, do your work, show up on time—and social or community ethics. Personal virtue is an undisputed good in almost every society, but we would be hard-pressed to say a slave owner who paid his bills and was kind to his wife was an ethical person. We need to think about how we behave collectively, how our society behaves, how the contexts of politics and economics, for example, interact with what we hold to be good. Most of us, after all, most of the time follow the conventions of our cultures—most Spartans act like Spartans, most Athenians like Athenians, most Americans like Americans. To be a person of moral character in an unjust social order requires us to work to change society.

Central to an education for citizenship, participation, engagement, and democracy—an education toward freedom—is developing in students and teachers alike the ability to think for themselves. To question. To imagine alternatives. The core lessons of a liberating education are these: We each have a mind of our own; we are all works in progress swimming toward an uncertain and indeterminate shore; we can join with others in order to act on our own judgments and in our own freedom; human progress and freedom are always the result of thoughtful action.

Schools for obedience and conformity are characterized by authoritarianism and irrelevance, passivity and fatalism. They turn on the little technologies for control and normalization in classrooms—the elaborate schemes for managing the crowd, the knotted system of rules and discipline, the exhaustive machinery of schedules and clocks, the laborious programs of testing and grading, assessment, judgment, and evaluation, all of it adding up to a familiar cave, an intricately constructed hierarchy—everyone in a designated place and a place for everyone. Knowing and accepting one’s pigeonhole on the vast and barren mountainside becomes all the lesson one needs.

The African-American thinker and educator Carter G. Woodson wrote his great work, *The Miseducation of the Negro*, in 1933 with the central argument turning on these issues. He was concerned with the power schools had to make people stupid:

When you control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find “his proper place” and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary.

“His education makes it necessary”—the stakes for Woodson were both stupendous and monstrous: participatory democracy versus an empty shell, a nation of sheep versus a collective of citizens, freedom versus slavery.

School has always been and will always be contested space—What should be taught? In what way? Toward what end? By and for whom?—and at bottom the struggle is over the essential questions: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to construct a meaningful, purposeful, and

valuable life in the world, here and now? What demands does freedom make?

On the side of a liberating and humanizing education is a pedagogy that has as its beginning and end identical points on a circle: the *act of questioning*. This *pedagogy of questioning* opens rather than closes spaces of curiosity, perspective, dialogue, and imagination. It's *modus operandi* is generous, not stingy; revealing, not concealing; unmasking, exposing, embracing. It's a tool that promotes intellectual growth, awakens curiosity, encourages skill development, and a lot else. And at its core this *pedagogy of questioning* demands something altogether different, something upending and revolutionary from students: Repudiate your subordinate place in the pecking order, it urges, remove that distorted, congenial mask of compliance. You must change. All of this requires a radical rethinking of the relationship of teacher and student, students and learning, schools and society, education and justice. The time is late. The struggle is now.

Rosa Luxemburg, the German revolutionary jailed for publicly opposing World War I, wrote to a friend from prison, urging her, she said, to be a *mensch*, a Yiddish word loosely translated as a person who does good in the world. A *mensch*, she elaborated, is someone who loves his or her own life enough to celebrate each sunrise and sunset, to admire the shape of the clouds, to enjoy well-prepared and healthy food, to invest in friends and loved ones. But a *mensch* must also be willing to put his or her shoulder on history's great wheel when required. So, a full and passionate embrace of the life we're given combined with an eagerness to oppose suffering and injustice. Both.

References

Woodson, C. G. (1933). *The miseducation of the Negro*. Washington DC: Associated Publishers.