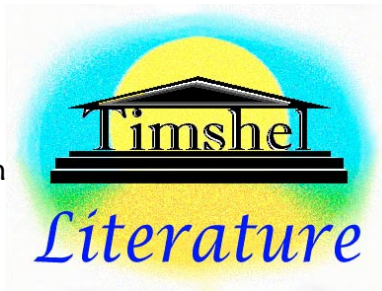


Justin Katz

Timshel Literature

jkatz@timshelarts.com



www.timshelarts.com

P.O. Box 751

Portsmouth, RI 02871

401-835-7156

Just Thinking, 04/07/03:

Recovered Memories of a Blue-State Childhood

by Justin Katz

Students protesting the war by sitting during the Pledge of Allegiance at a Massachusetts high school have brought the ACLU swooping to their defense.¹ Oh, they weren't disciplined in any way; they weren't singled out; they weren't even made to support their positions in an in-class debate. No, the supposed infringement on their rights came in the form of a note to their parents describing their activities. Merely questioning behavior that differed in a significant way from other students'.

Adding this to various other news items that have lately been scattered around my mental desk, particularly those involving continued opposition to the war and visceral hatred of the President, I more succinctly formed a question that's been on the edge of my mind: What makes these people the way they are? Not the children — the adults. How do they become so fanatical within positions that ostensibly eschew fanaticism? Why do they defend certain opinions even when that defense leads to blatant self-contradiction or, at least, foolishness?

As with reporters who insert bias while thinking it merely truth, the conspicuous partiality is likely a function of an intrinsic worldview, inculcated in the days that their sense of reality was formed. In looking back on my own childhood in blue-state America, I think I've recovered some

memories related to this mystery. Actually, the memories have always there; I've just never objectively questioned them as more significant than learning the alphabet.

One such instance involved a teacher who roved the district, conducting classes with those students at each school with particular inclinations toward creative work and the willingness to take on more of it. For a time, during which my school was undergoing renovations, Mrs. Garvin's class met in a small, dimly lit room adjacent to the principal's office. It was there that I saw her place her hand on a dictionary in a show of taking an oath to prove her honesty. Apparently, the performance was a repeat. In discussing the implications of this action, Mrs. Garvin, an extremely overt atheist, voiced an apothegm of which I would make use for many years thereafter, thinking myself quite erudite each time: "The Bible is the greatest work of fiction ever written." Of course, armed with this Truth, I felt no compulsion to actually read, much less study, the book in question.

When the renovations were finished, the school had a brand new gym in which to hold my sixth grade graduation. As part of that celebration, Mr. C, the music teacher, led our class in a rendition of "Cat's in the Cradle" by Harry Chapin. While the song may seem, at first listen, to be the lamentation of a father who neglected his son and, in his old age, was neglected by him, with the triumphant last few bars — "He'd grown up just like me/My boy was just like me" — the message becomes, ironically or not, one of pride. In my youth, I felt very wise to be able to explain the ending to anybody who described the song as "sad."

Another song with disturbing lyrics that I remember in entirety to this day is "Merry Minuet," by Sheldon Harnick, made famous by the Kingston Trio. This song I learned for a performance at day camp when I was no older than 10. Of the three lads who musically conveyed the sorry state of the world — "festering with unhappy souls" — to dozens of fellow campers, I was given a solo for the even-more-noticeably cynical lines, including the last one quoted here:

But we can be tranquil, and thankful, and proud,
 For man's been endowed with a mushroom-shaped cloud.
 And we know for certain that some lovely day
 Someone will set the spark off, and we will all be blown away.

By way of contrast, I remember one rainy day when some counselors put on the risqué Tom Cruise flick *Risky Business* while we waited for an ad hoc event to be set up indoors. Boy did they get in trouble! We didn't get so much as a glimpse of Rebecca De Mornay's naked body, and as I recall, the teens in charge faced a punishment even more severe than when we were all discovered looking through a hole in the changing-room wall. Sexual content was clearly too dangerous – enticingly so – for us to encounter.

Songs about nuclear holocaust? Hey, put 'em up on stage!

It would be assuming too much, certainly, to think that these specific experiences of mine explain an entire nation's foibles. But it points to broader context that adults apparently saw nothing inappropriate in such material. I find a poetic summary of the tangled mindset of our day in the last words of the “Merry Minuet”: “What nature doesn't do to us will be done by our fellow man.” Consider what political positions would grow from this if it were taken as an assumption, and you'll have much of the activism of the past few decades.

Now, when I come across people with skewed takes on reality, I'll wonder what anecdotes they might uncover were they led to question the views that grew from them. More than one generation of has grown up in an era when it's possible that they've sung songs around the campfire about dysfunctional families, natural disasters, and international bigotry. And perhaps these chords of fear have been punctuated with atheist shortcuts to thinking in a venue where any mention of God is likely to incur the wrath of the ACLU before a student can say, “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” Or not.

¹ “ACLU concerned with school policy reporting students who don't stand for pledge.” Associated Press. 4/2/2003 <http://www.boston.com/dailynews/092/nation/ACLU_concerned_with_school_pol%3A.shtml>