

SCHOOL DAYS

Let us reform our schools, and we shall find little reform needed in our prisons. John Ruskin

Public schools are the nurseries of all vice and immorality. Henry Fielding

He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches. G.B. Shaw

Education...has produced a vast population able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading. George Macaulay Trevelyan

Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education. Mark Twain

One who professes that he/she is an ignoramus should be believed. Anon

I am a mathematics professor with a great love for the subject. I have been an academic for many years. I have learnt that teaching math is frequently non rewarding since I manage to get through to very few of my students, even though I strive to choose those whom I think have an aptitude for the subject. I am most gratified on those rare occasions when I succeed in imparting some mathematical know how.

Despite the associated difficulties, I love my vocation. Perhaps being an educationalist provides one with a large ego trip, somewhat similar to the thrill of being a successful entertainer. I am in awe of all other teachers who have a love of and extensive knowledge of their subject specialty. In any case, none of this has anything to do with my tale.

I was sitting in my office pondering about a math paper I was writing when there was a knock on the door. Upon opening it, I encountered a strange looking individual. "My name is Abner Blaise. I wonder if I can have a few minutes of your time." "Please be seated", I responded, whereupon he explained, somewhat timidly.

"I am here on behalf of my daughter, although she does not know it. I am sure that you have encountered parents who extol their offspring's scholastic excellence, merited or not. It is not for that reason I am here despite that it may seem so. Shortly after Sheba's birth my wife and I realized that we had a 'Monstre Sacre'. We had no idea how to cope with this very strange infant who is now a young girl of seventeen. We felt that she would

have great difficulty interacting with her chronological peers. We educated her at home ourselves and kept her isolated from the world as best we could.

You must be wondering what I require from you. On numerous occasions I attended your public talks on a variety of topics. I was struck with your mathematical skills, humanitarian feelings, apparent sagacity and your knowledge of many aspects of the human condition, including the fine arts, social sciences and current events. I do not know whether you will be able to be of help. I would like you to meet and interact with our daughter. I am sure that you will quickly discern why I am concerned and perhaps provide some useful advice.”

He was right about one thing. On numerous instances I had encountered parents who had an exaggerated view of their progeny's talents. My first reaction was that this was nothing more than such a reoccurrence. However there seemed to be something special about Abner Blaise. He never mentioned what was unusual about his daughter. Although I was curious, I really did not think that anything would come out of it.

“You must know that I am somewhat skeptical about your story. However, I am willing to meet with her. If I find that you have been embroidering the truth, our get-together will be cut very short. In case I find something worth pursuing, I would then like to get together with you and your wife. Please bring both your wife and daughter to our next meeting.”

He agreed and we set up a meeting in two days time. In exactly two days and at the specified time they showed up. My first impression was that they appeared to be a non-descript average family. However, upon closer inspection, Mrs. Blaise and Sheba exuded a certain aura that I had never encountered before.

I asked them to be seated and make themselves comfortable. “Before I talk to Sheba would you please tell me something about yourselves.”

Mrs. Blaise responded. “We both come from a wealthy background so that we have the freedom to do as we wish. Professionally, I was a biochemist and Abner a physicist at a local university which is where we met, fell in love and subsequently married. Shortly after Sheba was born, we resigned our academic positions to devote all our time to raising our exceptional child. We are quite willing to answer any other questions you might have. Oh, by the way, my name is Jana.”

Abner, by his silence, seemed to suggest that Jana had covered all the salient facts. I could not think of any questions to pose to them. I was struck by her forthrightness, grace and obvious intelligence. I then turned to Sheba. Before I could ask her anything she interjected.

“When I was told about this meeting, I looked you up. I learned that you are an excellent professor of mathematics but you are not a mathematician. Your doctoral thesis was nothing more than a rehash of superb work done by Gauss, who is often referred to as the “Prince of Mathematics”. I know that I am far better versed in all branches of mathematics than you are. Also, I have written a number of unpublished papers that are totally original. I am willing to show them to you but I doubt that you would understand them. Please ask any questions that you may have.”

I was flabbergasted by her 'chutzpah'. Thirty minutes later I was convinced that she had not exaggerated. To every question I put to her, she responded with a breadth and depth that I, on my best days, had never even come close to considering. I ended up feeling that I was the student and she was the teacher. Her knowledge and understanding of all areas of mathematics was simply unbelievable. She exhibited similar comprehension of physics, chemistry, biology, social sciences, humanities, and the fine arts when questioned by the heads of each of these departments. With respect to music she was incredible. She played Bach's Goldberg Variations for solo piano that would have made Glenn Gould jealous. Similarly her rendition of the Bach Partitas for solo violin surpassed those of all the great violinists of our age. Apparently she was far more than a 'Renaissance Individual'. She was a singular phenomenon.

During my final session with her, I asked her the following question. "Is there anything that you don't know or understand that is bothersome?"

"There are two things. First, as knowledgeable as I am, I have no comprehension of the reason for existence. In other words, I cannot fathom why there is such a thing as existence or why anything exists. As for the second thing, I think I may be able to get a grasp of it. I do not comprehend why humanity behaves so frequently in such a destructive manner. Human history is marked by a succession of bloodletting activities. I have never had an opportunity to interact with my fellow humans, especially with those of my age; hence my lack of appreciation. I think it might be a good idea for me to enroll in this university to become better acquainted with my fellow students by studying their behavior. I promise to keep a low profile and not manifest my obvious superiority."

"First of all, no one understands why there is such a thing as existence and perhaps no one ever will. (Please see Author's Addendum for more on this topic.) Therefore, don't feel regretful about this. As for the second, I agree that it would be a good idea for you to interact with those of your age. What particular aspect of human behavior do you find troublesome?"

"It seems to me that there is one behavioral feature that is universal. I refer to humanity's desire to compete. Someone once stated rather strongly that, 'Winning is not everything. It is the only thing.' I fervently disagree. My motto would be, 'Competition, No! Cooperation, Yes!' I am sure that at one time in our early history, competition was necessary for purposes of survival. We competed for food, water, land, women, and power. At first it was at an individual level. Then it became a local phenomenon and grew into tribal battles and later into national ones which manifest themselves as wars, with a huge cost in human lives. It is time we stopped this nonsense. I would ban all forms of competition."

"What about games and sporting activities?," I asked.

"If you and I played a game of chess, under current conditions one of us would win, the other would lose or we would tie. Let us forget about the latter possibility. What I propose is that the supposed winner would review the game with the supposed loser to indicate where the loser had erred. In other words the game becomes an educational device resulting in a win/win situation. As for sporting activities, I would ban all professional sports as they are currently constituted. The same approach as our game of chess could be practiced at athletic games. Or they could become theatrical, as is presently done with 'wrestling'. I admit I do not know how to eradicate the apparent need to compete. I

hope you will allow me to become a supposed student in your university, to further study human behavior on a face-to- face basis.”

I immediately agreed. She started attending classes the very next day. It did not take her long to make friends with her fellow students. Then a startling occurrence took place. The students who socialized with Sheba obtained extraordinarily high results in the first term. By the end of the academic year, just about every student in the university had become first class. While none were as bright as Sheba, they literally outdid themselves. Somehow, her intellectual forte had become infectious. It took another twenty years before this condition became endemic on a world wide basis but only for the younger population. They literally took over the world and enforced a political philosophy akin to the one that Sheba had so eloquently expressed. It seems that Sheba may have been imbued with a contagious ‘Intelligence Virus’ that could only be transmitted to the youth. Sheba obviously knew what she had transmitted but kept it a secret. The world had now become the long sought paradise.

Much to my regret, I was awakened by the incessant buzzing of my alarm clock. All the preceding was nothing more than a beautiful dream. It contrasted with my daily life which is more of a nightmare. I am in the employ of a collection agency seizing the property of all who are in default vis a vis their debts. Many families are now homeless due to my efforts.

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Author’s Addendum

As to the reason for existence, I have come to the conclusion that this conundrum is a semantic riddle. For example, what does the sentence, “Nothing exists.” mean? If nothing exists than nothing is something. What are its properties? To answer that question it becomes necessary to interject some sort of measuring device into nothing, making it now a new something. It is evident that knowledge is expressed using language and mathematics. Both are extensions of our nervous systems. Both are imbued with contradictions that cannot be resolved from within. (Godel’s Theorem]. If we bring in an external factor, it becomes part and parcel of a larger entity requiring a new external factor. This can go on ad infinitum. It has been suggested that such a device is a primal force often referred to as “God”. Maybe so! I prefer to express my ignorance about the mystery of existence and call myself an agnostic.