



C.A.R.T.S.

CULTURAL ARTS RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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At Home in the World

by Jim Carnes

We acquire them early, like a secular catechism, the soothing catch-phrases of democracy: “We the People,” “Created equal,” “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” “A more perfect union,” “Out of many, one.”

It’s no secret that our nation’s Founders didn’t practice what they preached. According to some critics, these privileged White males, many of them slaveholders, brazenly exempted themselves and their peers from the demands they placed on posterity. (Such alleged hypocrisy has prompted campaigns to remove long-revered names from city streets, schools, and other facilities.) Another view is that the free, just, and pluralistic society they declared amounted to a prophetic vision—a radical insight into universal truths that they could transcribe but not fully enact. Whatever the explanation, their words pose an enormous challenge to anyone who would dare to be a teacher.

How long does it take for the disharmony to register, for a child’s experience to reveal the tension between these beautiful images and the society they claim to signify? For some, it comes early—in the piercing blow of a homophobic slur on the playground, in a teacher’s insistent mispronunciation of one’s name, in the anger of a parent stung by racism, in the thundering report of opportunity—or even entry—denied. For some, the dissonance sounds a warning—Pledge your allegiance lightly, if at all. For others, its bent notes give voice to the blues, an anguished resolve to en-

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dure the paradox and perhaps eventually to outwit it, or at least outlast it. For another group, the awakening is slow, insidious, unsettling. It exposes privileges and exemptions that we would prefer to conceal. For still others, the disharmony itself is reassuring, a reminder that one is, as the saying goes, “more equal” than others.

If membership and identity remain such vexing issues in our country, what can educators do to help students not only cope with the problem but also take action to resolve it?

Preparing young people for active citizenship is arguably the chief end of public education. This would seem a tall order under any circumstances, but there’s a catch: Democracy, by definition, is a work in progress. For two and a quarter centuries now, the three branches of our government have been at the task of defining and safeguarding the inalienable rights of all Americans, and the matter isn’t settled yet. Each generation must ask the next to do a better job of it, to bring us closer to what Josiah Royce called the beloved community.

Much of the most exciting work in education today—across grade levels, across the curriculum, and across the country—is explicitly aimed *Please turn to page 3*

Photo by Makalé Faber



Students at Public School 29 in Brooklyn hold up their origami.

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at building community. In a sense, this has always been a goal of good teaching, but the living memory of today's teacher force encompasses a revolution in the way the commitment has been carried out—from the social experiments of desegregation to the classroom strategies of multiculturalism and beyond.

At the heart of the revolution is a growing acknowledgment of children's own active role as co-creators of the educational experience. In the history of American pedagogy, the Socratic method has been no match for the factory model. Recent patterns in student achievement, school violence, teacher burnout, and other indicators, however, have made the limitations, even the hazards, of assembly-line schooling all too clear.

Myriad disciplines have contributed to this awakening, often under the broad and fuzzy designation "multiculturalism." Psychologists, for example, provide insights into identity, cognition, and behavior, including the causes of prejudice, the effects of trauma, the variety of learning styles, and the nature of sexual orientation. Arts educators emphasize the transformative power of self-expression and aesthetic experience. Media literacy activists have developed tools for questioning and confronting the control of information by corporations, governments, and other central powers. Civil and human rights educators have defined universal principles of political, social, and economic justice.

The list goes on, but no field surpasses folklore in its capacity to foster community in the classroom, to help all partners in education understand themselves as unique, participating members of a pluralistic society. Folklore offers a wealth of both content and methodology for exploring the ins and outs of social boundaries. Central to this process is the concept of the folk group—any group of people who share special language, customs, and traditions, whether on the basis of nationality, age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, politics, region, neighborhood, social class, family, occupation, interest, school, classroom, or other affiliation.

Think of all the groups you've ever belonged to, past or present. What attributes define each group? Which groups were you born into? Which groups did you join by choice? Which ones were you "assigned to" by others? If this simple inventory impresses you with your own ability

to negotiate multiple identities, imagine the assumptions, boundaries, and stereotypes that come into question when such an inquiry involves a whole community of learners.

Through documentary and analytical materials in all media, students can encounter the particular narrative, musical, material, ritual, emotional, and other expressions by which folk groups of all kinds, the world over, assert their identities, transmit them across time, and adapt them to new challenges. Further, by em-

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ploying skills and techniques such as interviewing, observation, mapping, and documentation, young folklorists can begin to recognize cultural complexity as an invaluable resource in themselves and others and a foundation for mutual respect.

Folklorist Alan Lomax evoked the urgency of this recognition in his 1977 "Appeal for Cultural Equity":

In our concern about the pollution of the biosphere we are overlooking what may be, in human terms, an even more serious problem.... A grey-out is in progress which, if it continues unchecked, will fill our human skies with the smog of the phony and cut the families of men off from a vision of their own cultural constellations. A mismanaged, over-centralized electronic communication system is imposing a few standardized, mass-produced and cheapened cultures everywhere....

The only way to halt this degradation of man's culture is to commit ourselves to the principle of cultural equity, as we have committed ourselves to the principles of political, social, and economic justice. (*Journal of Communication*, Spring 1977)

The last decade offered encouraging signs. Breaking events of the late 20th century linked political liberation with cultural expression around the world. Despite a

A student at Public School 11 in Queens, New York, tells her family's immigration story, which she depicted in painted images on her Chinese lantern.

sharp setback in China, the peaceful overthrow of Eastern European communism and South African apartheid raised hopes that the world's remaining engines of oppression and degradation—and with them, maybe even the very idea of war—were operating on borrowed time.

As if on cue, the Internet arrived to contest our assumptions about cultural vitality and borders even further. A new global transparency made it possible for indigenous peoples worldwide to share strategies for language preservation, or for American middle schoolers to speak out on behalf of child laborers in Pakistan. To some, it began to appear that the old familiar founding principles of our "nationality" had been pointing to global citizenship all along.

Now, in the span of a morning, the wind has shifted. A different litany rules the day: "United We Stand," "God Bless America," "Never Forget," "Homeland Security." For those who value the discourse, the ferment, the prodigious welcome that democracy ventures, the question is obvious—What vision of community do these new refrains afford?

Our job as educators for pluralism may temporarily have become a bit harder, but we have powerful tools at our disposal. And the most powerful is the oldest of them all. By ourselves, or within our groups, we can glimpse just a sliver of what it means to be human. Only by placing our own stories alongside the stories of others, across as broad a spectrum of experience as possible, can we begin to see ourselves whole.

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Photo by Martha Cooper