

A Letter from New Jersey

I have spent most of my life in the south central part of the United States – the heartland, the Bible Belt, the provincial, insular, backward, unsophisticated Southwest – Oklahoma, Kansas and Texas. I'm not sure that I always thought of my origins in those descriptive terms, but that is the way they are defined by people who come there to live or visit from other parts of the United States. That is the way they are pictured by people who have never been there. Three years ago when my husband's job opportunity gave us the option of staying in Oklahoma or moving to New Jersey, it didn't take a great deal of thought for us to choose to make the move to the East. Having spent most of our lives inland, we considered it a real adventure, full of possibilities, to move here. Just as Easterners have images of the Mid and Southwest, we rural types have always envisioned the East in particular terms - enlightened, sophisticated, learned, worldly, diversified, exciting. This notion of eastern intellectual superiority was reinforced when I was a student at Texas Wesleyan College in Ft. Worth some ten years ago. There I was introduced to a program for teaching philosophy to children. The program, which had originated with Professor Matthew Lipman in Montclair, New Jersey, astounded me with its potential. Now, mind you, in Texas and Oklahoma, it is not considered sound education to talk about teaching philosophy to children. "Philosophy" has threatening connotations of humanistic and communistic attempts to undermine the moral fiber of our country by corrupting our children. However, in the Southwest, we are partial to the idea of teaching our children to think more carefully. Therefore, the philosophy program is called "Critical Thinking" and has been widely accepted into the public school system there.

After finishing my education at Wesleyan and working closely with the P4C program, we moved back to Oklahoma. With tact and careful wording, I suggested the P4C program to my principal at the middle school. She approved my teaching it as an elective, and in 3 1/2 years no one in the community ever became alarmed or even aware that in teaching their children to think more critically, I was also philosophizing with them. In a community which I considered to be narrowminded, extremely conservative and rigorously determined to thwart any liberal thinking, I felt that I had accomplished no small task in teaching *Harry Stottlemeir* to their children.

Our entire family was excited when the chance to move east materialized. We were coming to the land of fine music, theater, art, dance, food, ivy league colleges and intellectual openness. I was fortunate to secure an English teacher position in the high school

in Summit, New Jersey. This is a town of affluent, well-educated professionals who fully expect their children to come out of the public school system ready to compete for admission to the very best eastern schools. Their children do just that. Now, I grant you that the town is politically conservative. Nevertheless, in a town of successful, bright, competitive, people such as these, I felt encouraged. Although politically right-wing, the town bears no resemblance whatsoever to the Bible-belt Republicans back home. The lack of strong religious roots or a link to established religion is one of the most noticeable things about this area to one like me who comes from that Bible Belt and a strong Protestant background. After biding my time for 1 1/2 years until I felt comfortable with and trusted by the administration, I pulled out all stops – foisted all publicity, test scores and publications about the P4C program on my department chairman. I fully expected an excited and quick positive response to my request to develop an elective class. I had timed my move to closely follow a barrage of reports from the board indicating the nationwide concern for American children to develop more critical thinking skills.

The day after giving her the materials, the chairman spoke to me in a severe tone, informing me that an attempt had already been made to bring P4C to Summit, NJ, schools; that the concerned citizens had read *Harry* and had been quite convinced that it was simply a new type of material for teaching values to public school children. As everyone in education knows, teaching "values" is considered a subversive, disruptive (to community values) activity. She made it clear that Summit's upright and conservative citizens would not tolerate such an attempt to undermine the welfare and wholesomeness of its children.

I was stunned. I felt that I had been transported back in time and space to Oklahoma or Texas where people are viewed as narrowminded and provincial and nonintellectual. But I wasn't. I was in Summit, NJ, some twenty-five miles from Montclair, Matthew Lipman, and the origin of the very best available program for developing critical thinking skills in children.

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