Bandwagons Also Go to Funerals*

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We owe it to ourselves, our profession, and the learning disabled children to consider carefully not only what our intellect provides but also what our senses reveal and where our instincts and emotions guide us. We need to think about our efforts from a variety of perspectives—those both contrary to and supportive of our current opinions. The following "unmailed" letters present a unique and controversial perspective. Please let us hear from you.—D.A.N.

Unmailed Letter 1

Dear Friend,

Possibly the most neglected question in science is why a specific tradition went on the wrong track. Even among the wisest scientists, even among those who take their history seriously, that question is rarely asked. Histories do not seem to dwell on the wrong tracks that people have followed, even those followed for generations, sometimes for centuries. Alchemy, one of the better known wrong tracks, was relegated to the realm of ignorance and superstition as though its practitioners had nothing in common with those who discovered more fruitful paths and as though those wrong tracks produced nothing whatever of value. The Lysenko era of postrevolutionary Russia was a time of not only the wrong track but the wrong train. And although we might have learned something from the history of that period, it was all swept away as a case of what happens when there is tyranny and too much bad politics.

In my own field, the histories of the almost infinite methodologies and the uncountable attempts to prevent disabilities or ameliorate their devastating effects also inadvertently recount the many wrong paths we have taken. But when are we going to realize that if our early heroes had devoted themselves to cultivating beneficial social conditions for people with special needs rather than becoming obsessed with the pathology of difference, a whole other story of human services might have developed?

*These two letters are the first of four to appear in the *Journal* and are part of an in-progress, book-length manuscript to be titled *Unmailed Letters: On Special Education, Higher Education, and Other Sides of My Education.*

As a result, virtually none of the histories of our various scholarly fields suggest what might have been different had we thought better about those problems, and consequently, they failed to suggest what we might yet have a chance to accomplish if we change our ways.

Sure, there is a difference between the old Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the new "Make Pariah Administration." The old WPA made work for itself, but the idea was to offer people, who otherwise would have been idle, useful things to do. Sure, the old WPA was a "make work" effort, but its purpose was to rehabilitate the idle and at the same time create good works for society. The Make Pariah Administration, the industrial-medical-educational monolith that manufactures diseases in order to "cure" them, serves the rich and deprives the poor and others in need; it serves itself and not society, and it extends rather than diminishes suffering.

From medical symposia, which for some are nothing more than two-day vacation payoffs from the pharmaceutical companies, to television specials featuring Julie Andrews traipsing through the hills of Garmisch singing about the "puzzle children"—another label for the victims of this "disease" that has now reached pandemic proportions—from those who are in it because of their greed to others who are in it because of their naivete, learning disabilities to them has become our newest "cultural" disease.

We used to worry about transmitting inferior genes, and thus polluting future generations. Despite our ever-dirtying atmosphere, we should better worry about transmitting stupid ideas to each other. My hope that this foolishness will stop is nurtured in the possibility that enough people will realize that the creators of this "disease" have gone too far, and thus they expose themselves. The claim that 40% or 50% of all children in schools have a learning disability is a denial of Rule No. 1. By definition, atypicality denotes rarity; by definition, normative behavior is what we expect and, indeed, it is against the norm that we judge the abnormal. Here is a situation where the norm is the abnormal. Do you blame me for being angry?

Your friend,
Burton Blatt

Unmailed Letter 2

Dear Friend,

It has been a long day, much of it spent at a medical conference dealing with what's now called "minimal brain dysfunction." I am tired, not too happy, but most of all, I am angry. I am angry with this new disease, "learning disabilities." And I am angry with myself for exposing myself to the disease.

A couple of generations ago, a small group of psychologists led by A.A. Strauss and Heinz Werner described what came to be known as the brain-injured child, someone whose nonspecific

minimal brain damage is characterized by perceptual and thinking problems as well as by hyperactivity, uncoordination, and a generally uninhibited and socially unacceptable personality. At that time, it was estimated that 1% of the child population might be brain-injured.

America now seems to have fallen in love with minimal brain dysfunction, or learning disabilities—a popular and even more up-to-date name for brain injury. The Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (ACLD) has thousands and thousands of members. Some recent books claim that as many as 30% or 40% of all children in school are learning disabled. One such book assures us that half of the children in school are learning disabled. A distinguished pediatrician wanted us to know at the aforementioned medical conference that 80% of all juvenile delinquents are learning disabled. And as he spoke those words, I seemed to be the only angry person in the crowd. I looked around and saw beaming faces, especially those on the necks of the pharmaceutical representatives who sponsored the meeting, people who work for the same company that manufactures the most popular drug used to reduce hyperactivity of the learning disabled. What started as a cottage industry whose operators were scientists has now become a powerful variant of the industrial-medical-educational monolith.

I also have bilingualism on my mind. It is my understanding that the bilingualism movement was powered by remembrances of the early "melting pot" movement. As I am sure you know, the idea of the melting pot made Americans of virtually all of the immigrant children. Unfortunately, the price was high, not that the immigrant children minded so much, but their parents surely suffered. The price of learning to read and write and speak English, and thus of learning to be an American, was psychological disownment of one's parents. In order to make quick Americans, the schools taught the immigrant children to be ashamed of and to even hate their parents and the ways of the old country. Much later, accommodation to the foreign tongue was by way of a program called "English as a Second Language (ESL)." It was designed not to keep English second but to recognize the immigrant child's inferior English skills and goad him to improve and, eventually, forget the foreign tongue.

Now we have a new program, bilingualism. The virtue of bilingualism is its recognition and support of the child's cultural heritage. Spanish, for example, not only starts out on an equal footing with English but remains equal. That's the virtue, but there is a liability—a potentially dangerous one. One of the grand accomplishments of the "melting pot" philosophy was that language did not tend to separate Americans. That's an unequaled achievement, and when we now compare that aspect of our lives with what is going on in Canada, we appreciate the importance of this accomplishment even more. However, depending on how far the bilingualism movement goes, there can be trouble ahead. In two or three generations there can be Americans who cannot or will not speak English. Who knows but that there will be a serious separatist movement in the United States some day. We talk easily about what good bilingualism will do, yet we are near silent about what could go wrong.

We must take all history seriously—the history of what we did right and the history of what we did wrong. People learn from both their successes and their failures.

Your friend,
Burton Blatt

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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