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“Let the Sun Shine In”

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Several innovative colleagues at Colorado College designed what they call “Critical Karaoke,” where one can talk over a song to tell the audience something about it, but only for as long as the song lasts. So you ought to know that “Let the Sun Shine In” was the grand finale to Galt MacDermot’s iconic theater piece, “Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical,” which opened in 1967, yes, that was in the infamous ’60s, and in fact this musical and this song helped make those ’60s infamous. It was the first anti-war, free-love, hippie-themed, nude-scened musical ever! It had to do with love, peace, civil rights, drugs, and, like all the great issues of that time, with hair. You could express opinions about a lot of issues by how you wore your hair. As one character sings in the title song, “I want it long, straight, curly, fuzzy, snaggy, shaggy, ratty, matty, oily, greasy, fleecy, shining, gleaming, streaming, braided, powdered, flowered, and confettied, bangled, tangled, spangled, and spaghettied! Oh say can you see my eyes - if you can then my hair's too short.”

But why did this musical end with a song, “Let he Sun Shine In?” What did that mean? In the words of James Rado, one of the lyricists and creators of the show, “Writing for the theater, we were aware of the traditional Broadway format, but we wanted to write something new, something different, something that translated to the stage the wonderful excitement we felt in the streets of the East Village. The times were experimental so we decided to experiment.” He might very well have said we decided to “let the sun shine in.”

Let's remember the turbulent '60s. They were the times of the legendary civil rights march in Selma, Alabama, (which had its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this past March). They were the times of the war in Vietnam, which to many seemed like the most senseless war in history. They were the times of NOW, the National Organization for Women. And they were times that saw the first man walk on the moon and a gruesome presidential assassination. And in the words of one social critic, "it was an era when the inhabitants of a rigid culture, unable to contain the demands for greater individual freedom, broke free of the social constraints of the previous age through extreme deviation from the norm." But was there a revolution in the good old sense, you know, like those of the 1770s here in the U.S. or the 1780s in France? Were governments toppled by their own people? No. But they were changed by an outward expression of *reasonable* discontent. All those things that were wrong with society — racism, homophobia, and a questionable war — were exposed by the light of public reason.

So "Let the Sun Shine In" was a metaphor for allowing the dissident and largely young population to come to understand just what was happening around them. It was a metaphor for them to apply reason in examining the social constraints they felt from the politics, philosophies, morals, and general customs of the post-WW2, conformist decades. And by exposing to the light of day the cultural issues they were questioning, they felt they could address them, express their discontent, and hopefully bring about change.

The story of "Hair" centers on the plight of one of the protagonists, Claude Bukowsky, a young man from the Midwest. He has joined the "tribe."

His hair is long and he has adapted to the lifestyle of his new friends, even joining them in a group LSD trip. Like all the young men in the “tribe,” however, he has been issued a draft card and is now called for his induction physical. He passes the physical and is ordered to report. In a ceremony around a bonfire, the others burn their draft cards in an act of defiance, which was not uncommon in 1967. He throws his card in the fire, but quickly and furtively pulls it out and throws in his library card instead – is that a poignant switch? He agonizes over what to do. As he said after the acid trip, "I can't take this moment to moment living on the streets ... I know what I want to be ... invisible." We know he has made his decision when he appears in his military uniform with his hair cut very short. And as the song “Let the Sun Shine In” brings the show to a close, the tribe separates to reveal Claude, face down on a black shroud on the floor. He has died in Vietnam.

Like the “East Village” tribe of the '60s, we now continue to question the values of our political and cultural environment. Racism didn't end with the Selma march and women didn't gain true equality with NOW. And most would say senseless wars didn't end with Vietnam.

We might learn still more about our dissident thinking by bringing the '60s into conversation with the well-known historical Age of Enlightenment in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. That era, a namesake of “Let the Sun Shine In,” was known for a number of great thinkers, such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Jefferson, who applied reason to illuminate philosophical, political, and cultural issues. Were the 1960s, and will the years after 2015, be rebirths of that spirit that prevailed in the 1780s? The parallels between the two earlier eras are striking. In the 1960s, we struggled for the civil rights of all people in an era of

entrenched and persistent racism; in the 1780's they struggled for civil rights in an age of absolute and totalitarian rulers. In the '60s, we struggled to maintain the right to express ourselves in free speech in the face of considerable danger, like being shot by the National Guard on a university campus; in the 1780s they struggled to speak out on political issues without winding up in the Bastille (that was a prison for political dissidents in Paris). In the '60s, young people fought to think for themselves concerning issues such as war and peace, how they wore their hair, religion, and astrology, and, of course, the less comfortable issues such as sexual freedom and drug use. In the 1780s, they struggled for the right to pursue a life of liberty — liberty from oppressive taxation, liberty from the inequality of the nobility and the bourgeoisie, liberty from wars of political expansion, and, as we shall see, liberty from the often humiliating rights of the aristocracy. In both eras, dissident people were attempting to reveal societal flaws by exposing them to the light of reason.

Among the brilliant thinkers and writers in that 18<sup>th</sup>-century Age of Enlightenment was the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. You heard the sentences that best express Kant's ideas in Mikey Poneman's introduction. (And by the way, Mikey, thanks so much for your kind and generous words.) In his essay titled "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" Kant encouraged young people to free themselves from their self-imposed immaturity, and to have the courage to think for themselves. As he put it, "*Sapere aude*" – dare to know, or be audacious in your thinking. He observes that too often we let others do our thinking for us. In his words, "It is so easy to be immature. If I have a book to serve as my understanding, a pastor to serve as my conscience, a physician to determine my diet for me, and so on, I

need not exert myself at all. I need not think, if only I can pay: others will readily undertake that irksome task for me. The guardians who have so benevolently taken over the supervision of men have carefully seen to it that the far greatest part of them regard taking the step to maturity as very dangerous, not to mention difficult.”

But Kant finds hope for the principle of enlightenment. He notes that there are always a few individuals who are willing take the risk and make public their reasoning about difficult and controversial issues. As he says, “even among the entrenched guardians of the great masses a few will always think for themselves, a few who, after having themselves thrown off the yoke of immaturity, will spread the spirit of a rational appreciation for both their own worth and for each person's calling to think for himself.”

There were many individuals in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century who did just this. One of my favorites was Pierre August Beaumarchais, a Frenchman of many talents and heroic deeds, including the dangerous one of selling arms to the American colonists in their quest to gain freedom by overthrowing the British. But perhaps his most important vocation was playwright. And his most famous play was *The Marriage of Figaro*, the story of a servant named Figaro who wanted to marry another servant named Suzanne employed in the same noble household. However, his Lord, the lecherous Count Almaviva, lusts after Suzanne and wants to exert the ancient seigniorial right of sleeping with the bride the night before her wedding. Naturally, Figaro is profoundly upset about this circumstance and is determined to prevent the dastardly deed from occurring. He is also profoundly upset about the state of affairs that would allow the existence of such seigniorial rights in the first place.

In one tirade, he says, “No, My Lord Count, you shan’t have her, you shall not have her! Because you are a great nobleman you think you are a great genius . . . Nobility, fortune, rank, position! How proud they make a man feel! What have you done to deserve such advantages? Put yourself to the trouble of being born – nothing more. For the rest – a very ordinary man! Whereas I, lost among the obscure crowd, have had to deploy more knowledge, more calculation and skill merely to survive than has sufficed to rule all the provinces of Spain for a century! Yet you would measure yourself against me?... “

Was Beaumarchais risking his personal freedom by having the protagonist he created speak so openly in defiance of the aristocracy which ruled in his society? Certainly. And in fact he did wind up in jail, arrested the opening night of the play by order of the King. However, the King soon realized that Beaumarchais and Figaro had illuminated some flaws in his control of France. He recognized Beaumarchais’ potential power of Beaumarchais’ wit and quickly ordered his release from prison. But that was not enough for the playwright. In further defiance, he refused to leave jail until the King agreed to allow the performances of Figaro to continue and to attend one himself! Did that take courage? You bet, but the dissident, through his public reasoning, prevailed.

Beaumarchais created Figaro. But we might say that one of the greatest musicians of all time, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, brought him to life just as Galt MacDermot brought Claude Bukowsky to life 200 years later. When Figaro had finally understood the Count’s plan, he had to convince himself that he had the courage to act, and to defy his Lord. In a cunning aria, the text presents a charming metaphor for Figaro’s plight. He says “*Se vuol ballare, signor contino,*

*il chitarrino le suonaro.*” “if you want to dance, mister little count, I will play the guitar.” In other words, I know that what you want to do is wrong and I can take control to stop it. In a moment we will hear the beginning of this beautiful aria. But first notice that the strings in the orchestra are plucked just like the strings of Figaro’s imaginary guitar. And notice also the confidence and determination of Figaro’s cocky melody. He is plucking up the courage to defy and outsmart his Count while at the same time he plucks the guitar strings. But notice finally that Figaro’s melody is doubled by the French horns. Without going into too much history, the horn was a symbol of the cuckold. Mozart subtly reminds us of the real dangers that lurk in Figaro’s path.

I would not dare to presume that the 1960s were a reincarnation of the 1780s, or that the 20-teens may be another new incarnation. But I would venture that there were and are very similar challenges for these ages. We have seen similarities in the plights of both Claude Bukowsky and Figaro. But one more important similarity remains. Both of these characters, while vigorously expressing their feelings, work within societal norms. Claude substitutes his library card for his draft card at the moment of truth. And it was not illegal to burn your library card. And Figaro, while he schemes and tries to outsmart the Count, feigns to be acting as a loyal servant. And today, most people advise demonstrators not to break the law no matter how heinous the crime they are demonstrating against. Kant advised against outright revolution because he believed it would most likely create a void to be filled by new despots. Rather, he believed that continued public expression of what your reason tells you would eventually bring about more gradual but longer-lasting change. The concluding question in his essay is poignant: do we live in an Enlightened Age? His answer is no, but we live in an age of Enlightenment.

Once we think we are enlightened, we are in danger of no longer thinking. Instead, if we live with a commitment to our on-going public reasoning, to our need to speak out, to our need to try to stimulate change, we will see change and live in an exciting time. And it is this challenge that will ensure the continuation of our commitment to be audacious in our thinking, and our ability to stimulate freedom of thought and speech. *Sapere aude* indeed!

Before finishing, I would like to express my appreciation for being asked to give this address. I have been privileged to be a part of Colorado College for most of my working life. And one of the privileges is, ironically, the responsibility to keep learning from our bright CC students and to keep changing with them. Each May I have my own commencement along with 500 or so younger graduates. And I always look forward to the new year and to new generations of freshcreatures (by the way, freshcreature is a gender-neutral term for what we used to call freshmen). Granted, my graduations are not quite as earth shattering or life-changing, as yours will be tomorrow, seniors. But I look forward to the challenges of using my own reasoning, of expressing my thoughts publically, and to letting the sun shine into my next year. And thereby, I hope for the determination and courage to continue releasing myself from my own immaturity by doing MY OWN THINKING.