

EDITORIAL

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p e r s p e c t i v e s

OLD ETYMOLOGISTS NEVER DIE: THEY WON'T EVEN FADE AWAY

By Prof. McKinley Burt

Like the timeless presence of old soldiers, the curtain will never ring down upon (the 'book' will never close on) Noah Webster, compiler of the first 'American' dictionary of the English language.

I don't know what I was thinking; I believed that writing "conclusion" on last week's article would neatly wrap up an 'arcane excursion'. Once ignited among the readers, there was no way to arbitrarily end the intellectual excitement sparked by a well-documented account of this pioneer in the study of the 'meaning' of words (and concomitantly, their origin). An 'etymologist.'

Biographers Levitt, Warfel, Rollins, et al say that "Webster taught himself twenty languages, including Anglo-Saxon, Old Irish, Sanskrit and Persian in order to discover how modern words and their meaning had evolved over centuries of use." Samuel Johnson, author of the preceding English language standard excluded many of Webster's words as "barbaric innovations"... "American are a race of convicts who should be grateful for what's allowed.

What I was not surprised to find

was the large number of Portlanders interested in "cryptograms, ciphers, codes and 'secret writings'." My little discourse on the use of the Navajuo Indian language to confuse Japanese cryptographers during World War II found many of our readers quite familiar with that strategy.

In the days when I had the time and inclination, I spent a lot of pleasurable time solving or creating many codes and cyphers. Yes, I read a number of books on Alan Turing and his code-breaking machine which solved the "Enigma Code" used by German U-boats and Nazi spies in World War II. Fantastic!

The following two small books will provide an easy introduction to the field for any age group:

"Codes, Ciphers and Secret Writings", Martin Gardner "Cryptograms And Spygrams", Norma Gleason both may be obtained from Dover Publications, Inc. whose catalogs list many scores of books on mathematical and word recreations; 180 Varick Street, New York, N.Y. 10014.

Several grandparents said they had a sense that during the early and middle 1970's there was a period when black youngsters seemed to be doing fairly

well with language and reading skills. I think they are quite right, because I was teaching half-time at PSU and also contracting with the school district to develop programs to both motivate and raise skills at the classroom level. Each week I was at a northeast school.

I have a file drawer full of rewarding accounts of minority children, K-8, who proved so easy to motivate - when there was sustained interaction with a dedicated (and competent) instructor. Not only was I a witness 'on site', but I had a realistic feedback as chairperson of the "Minority Teachers Association.

Two striking instances of this desirable interaction occur most immediately. At the "Kellog" School, white teacher Fern Morey was able to raise "slow readers" to an inspired interest in the written word. And she sent unsolicited, glowing descriptions of what could be accomplished with the proper motivational material.

And at Tubman Elementary School, a black teacher used my book, "Black Inventors of America" as the 'physical' model for constructing a book: Front and back covers, title page, table of contents and an index. This turns

out to be a rather formidable (and rewarding) learning task for fourth-graders, even at just 8 pages.

And believe it or not I have before me a news article from Feb. 30, 1991, "The Humboldt School Chess Team has made it into the "State Chess Championships". Doug Strong who is in charge of the Humboldt team, said (in 1991) "We've had this team for about five years now and we've been winning tournaments since we started. Each year we keep getting better, smart kids, huh?"

This, of course, is the very same school that a decade later required "blowing up" in order to reach an acceptable level of educational performance. It was suggested that special teachers and instructional modes were needed to deal with "disadvantage dummies."

We would like to know who were the "dummies" (within or without the system) who didn't or couldn't follow up and build upon the wonderful intelligent, pupil base that was on hand? Was this intentional?

Yes I did see the Associated Press headline of 7/15/98, "Germany signs off on erasing 'laborious' language rules." Will this be called "Teutonic"?

Tragedy in Nigeria Demands International Vigilance

The tragic, untimely death of opposition leader Chief Moshood K.O. Abiola on the eve of his release from prison threatens to reverse recent progress towards democratic reforms in Nigeria. Rev. Jackson has spoken with the Abiola family to offer his condolences. He also expressed his desire to help the family and the Nigerian people in any way he can to move forward in Abiola's spirit.

Contemplating Abiola's significance to the Nigerian people, Rev. Jackson said, "Like Mandela, his desire for freedom was connected to his desire for democracy and freedom for the whole country."

In the hours after learning of Abiola's death, Rev. Jackson said, "This could be a destabilizing event. I hope the people of Nigeria will gather themselves and use their en-

ergy to move forward toward de-

(Nigerians) start the downward spi-

Chief Abiola yesterday to deter-

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mocracy even through their pain, fear and suspicion. We urge the people not to let this alter their quest for democracy and the release of the remaining political prisoners."

Rev. Jackson continued, "If they

ral into violence, they will destroy every democratic dream they ever had. Instead they should turn their pain into power and not into self-destruction."

An autopsy was performed on

the cause of death. Rev. Jackson supported the Abiola family in their call for the autopsy to address suspicions of foul play. "The suspicions are unavoidable," said Rev. Jackson. "A month ago, General Abacha, who was the number one impediment to democracy, died very suddenly. Now, less than a month later, the number one force for democracy (Abiola) has died very suddenly. So we look forward to finding out what the doctors' conclusions are."

To Be Equal A Clear, Consistent Message

By HUGH B. PRICE
 PRESIDENT
 NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

How long does it take for an ethnic group in America to climb out of poverty? And how can we know when significant progress is being made? What will the rate of progress be for African Americans?

The answer to that old American question is being fashioned right before our eyes these days through the stories of striving and success African Americans have posted in the three decades since the civil rights triumphs of the 1960s.

The answer is also being crafted by the nation's --and Black America's--response to the problems which continue to beset poor black neighborhoods, families, and individuals.

I was drawn to consider this very broad question when the federal National Center for Health Statistics released its annual study of births in America earlier this month. Its most surprising finding: The birth rate for unmarried black women, one of the flashpoints in the debate over race in America, has reached its lowest point in 40 years.

According to the federal survey, encompassing 3.9 million births in 1996, the last year for which figures are available, the birth rate for unmarried black women was 74.4 births per 1,000 women. That is a remarkable drop from the peak birth rate reached just nine years ago of 90.7 per 1,000 unmarried black women.

The out-of-wedlock birth rate has declined for all age groups of black women, federal researchers found; and it comes amid a significant overall downward trend in birth. Fewer babies were born in 1996 than in any

year since 1987. But black teen girls, until recently, the group with the highest level of births, showed the most dramatic birth-rate decline.

Teen births among African Americans fell by 21 percent between 1991 and 1996, to just over 9 percent of all black teenage girls, Hispanic-American teens are now most likely to give birth, although their rates also fell, from nearly 11 percent in 1995 to just over 10 percent in 1996, their first significant drop since 1991.

(For all teens, the overall 1996 birth rate was 54.7 for every 1,000 young women ages 15 to 19, down from the 1991 rate of 62.1)

"There's been no letup, and it's not been slowing down," Stephanie J. Ventura, the federal demographer who wrote the report, told the New York Times. "And it's not just for teenagers. For all black women under 30, the declines have been really big."

The figures took much of the health community by surprise.

But demographers and health experts said that the good news probably results from a combination of several different things: the precaution, including both increased use of contraceptives and abstention from sex, the AIDS epidemic is causing some men and women to take; the impact of sex education, either within or outside of schools; and efforts by some organization to encourage abstention or the use of contraceptives.

Dr. Donna E. Shalala, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, said referring to the decline in the black teen birth rate, "What is significant is that these declines are in every state. I give a lot of credit to the African-American community, which has put out a clear, consistent message from the churches, from the schools, and all sorts of civic

organizations, a drumbeat to young women and young men that they should not become parents until they are truly ready to support a child; that having children too early will limit their options."

That's one of the significant points to consider about this positive surprise: the importance of sending out a clear, consistent message.

The message that has been "beamed" to young people in more intense fashion over the past decade has been to alert them to a vitally important fact of life: Nearly 80 percent of children born to unwed teenage mothers grow up in poverty.

Put positively, the message has urged them to follow three simple steps to give themselves--and their future children--a chance to avoid a life of poverty:

- First, finish high school.
- Second, get married before having their first child.
- And third, hold off having that child until they're over 20 years old themselves, and equipped to provide for their family.

The federal statistics indicate that our children are getting the message. It's not being Pollyannish to celebrate that--even as we recognize the need to continue to work to reduce the still unacceptably high out-of-wedlock birth rate. (69.8 percent of black children were born out-of-wedlock in 1996, compared to nearly 22 percent for non-Hispanic whites, and nearly 41 percent for Hispanics.)

We can take heart from Donna Shalala's point that teen-age pregnancy is most often a consequence of a girl's feeling of hopelessness about the future. If adolescents--girls and boys--think they have a future, she pointed out, they put off having babies.

Fortunately, there still remains a safe haven on television. We're OPB, and we've got fun, nonviolent shows like Barney & Friends, The Puzzle Place and now Arthur, all part of the Ready to Learn Service on OPB.

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