

Urban Putty

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Silos aren't for living... only for storage!

Have you noticed lately how many of us are living in sad and listless isolation? Oh, it's not that there are no people around! There are plenty of bodies, and faces, everywhere. It's just that, as Bill Cosby complains on *Kids Say the Darndest Things*, "Nobody is listening to me!"

It was Oprah Winfrey accepting the Bob Hope Humanitarian Award on the Emmy Awards show recently who said, "Everyone wants to be able to tell his story, and have someone listen to it!"

People, human beings, you and me, we're people of a – the – many stories. We carry our stories inside, in safe places, where no one will touch them, and where no one will hurt them. And we grow accustomed to keeping them hidden from the world outside. John Powell, in a tiny, but moving, book, *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* writes his own answer: "Because you might reject me, and that is all I have!"

Identity is not a word, which is easily defined. It is a notion which many people try to help us to define, because they know better than we just who we are. Perhaps we are drowning in a tidal wave of externally imposed identities, drawn, painted, gossiped, shared secretly

by both men and women, none of whom really knows us, because there is much more energy spent on the muscles required to speak than on the energy it takes to listen.

Our teachers tell us, "If you don't start to work, you will lose your year!" And they send notes home to parents, before the end of September in a new school year, with that message.

Talk about "cover your ass" notes! The note should read, "If your child continues this way, without trying, I will be a failure, and I can't stand that prospect. So before s/he proves I am, I am warning you, so that there is no doubt that I am not responsible!"

What would happen if the teacher were to ask him/herself, or perhaps even more to the point, ask the student, "Why are you not trying?" The silo might not get built around that student, because s/he might just experience a degree of acceptance, support, encouragement and companionship.

"Lazy" is a term every male in North America has heard used to describe him, at some point in his life. "Lazy" is also a term which screams out of the mouth of the person using it, *"I do not know you, and I do not know why you are not interested, motivated, inspired... in the tasks, work assignments, homework...whatever it is... and more importantly, I do not care to know!!!"*

Judgments, from parents, teachers, bosses, even peers, not only fly through the air, when they are delivered the first time; they continue to play, like unstoppable tapes in our inner ear for decades. We try to fill our days with so

much activity, hoping to cover with white noise these “judgment tapes”.

An Ottawa businessman/educator recently put it so succinctly, and so simply, as he lamented the conditions within the business community in which his business is located. “People do not seem to get it, that if the other businesses in the area succeed, we all succeed. They all sit around and estimate just how long it will take for each business to fail!” (Does this sound like the teacher warning of failure? Or am I missing something?)

Now there is a wind current that will drive the business people in that district of Ottawa away from each other. Such snobbery, such demeaning attitudes, such patronizing condescension and such fixation on the negative...it is the stuff of which silos are constructed.

When the winds are blowing gusts of the unchallenged, impenetrable attitudes of those addicted to the negative (even though they call themselves “realists” and not “dreamers”) into the small and fledgling nests of the new entrepreneurs, that is not a wind that we need, deserve, or tolerate! Nor will the student whose teacher refuses to get to know him/her tolerate those winds, if s/he has enough support to fend them off!

Margaret Atwood wrote a book probably two or three decades ago, entitled, *Survival*, in which she chronicled the theme of survival in Canadian literature. This was in juxtaposition to the American theme of success. I recently listened as an American citizen, of my acquaintance, (she is my wife!) explained her perception of this country,

after a visit to Christopher Plummer’s *King Lear* in Stratford, “*This is a country of quiet, understated but global quality accomplishments!*”

I heard a similar plea, from a different voice recently in Ottawa. Many others will hear from this entrepreneur/educator who graduated in mid-life with his wife from university, after parenting four children to relative inter-dependence, in the near future. His voice will be heard simply because it cannot be stopped!

A half-hour in his presence prints it indelibly in my “hyper-active” file. This man knows what he is talking about in elementary and secondary education. He knows that he knows what he is talking about! (That is not arrogance, but confidence, something we seem to have far too little of - hence the millions of inhabited silos!) He knows that he doesn’t know everything, and listens carefully when some new proposition, perspective, or insight flutters into the room. He is engaged in the process of educating, of growing his business and in the process of inspiring others to become engaged. Very frightening! And he is carrying the hopes, not only of the businesses in his section of Ottawa with hopeful optimistic owner/operators, but also of the parents and children who visit his learning centres, *Grade Expectations*.

And the truth is that he will continue to tell his story, and learn more through the telling, and the encounters, which make the telling feasible. And the more he tells it, the more others will tell others about “this man” in Ottawa who has a passion, and a story, and a mission...and no Canadian voice of pessimism, or doom,

or “reality” as they like to call it, will silence him. Nor should it!

His name is Jim Davis, the owner-operator of *Grade Expectations*, a small tutoring shop, now numbering four in Ottawa, from modest beginning of only one three years ago. No silo can or will contain his passion! If you are comfortable in your silo, please do not call him! Call him only if and when you are interested in being “disturbed” “challenged” “provoked” or even “awakened” especially about the school system, but also about growing positive, supportive attitudes around your business area.