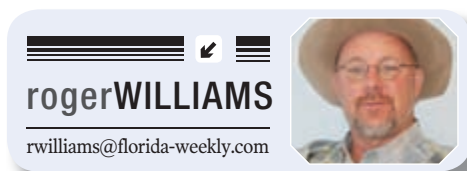


COMMENTARY

The wisdom of Mr. Ashton



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Somebody must have been frightened by my little scene-setting column on education cuts last week (cuts, get it? As in slices or slashes or lacerations).

I hacked it out as a screenplay, 1,000 words of make believe that also delivered my notion about the wisdom, or lack of it, of cutting off anything or anybody from any public-school classroom — especially art or music teachers, and especially their heads. (Notice I didn't say anything about cutting off the heads of bureaucrats, or amputating entire administrative divisions. I said, "from any public-school classroom," and you can quote me on that.)

I was hoping some camera-phile would film my Hollywood eye-popper, blood, razors, mounted heads of art teachers and all. And then they'd distribute it to the nation, rated R for Roger, in a four minute short that would first appear at Sundance, before blazing across the American consciousness.

But on second thought, maybe not.

A reasonable-sounding soul named Bob Ashton criticized the piece, and mailed his criticism in a letter to one of the paper's owners, the unflappable art director Jim Dickerson. Jim forwarded the letter to one of the other owners, the peerless editor Jeff Cull.

Jeff fired me on the spot, as he should have done long ago.

No, just kidding.

In fact, nobody said anything about the letter to me — not Jim, who didn't even copy me, and not Jeff, who merely and dutifully forwarded the criticism without comment.

Both of them are gentlemen, and both probably would have preferred to see something other than my scalding sarcasm in print. They are also stoics, who can remain mute while bleeding from open wounds delivered unintentionally by their columnist, or by correspondents complaining about their columnist, or by anybody else who doesn't like what we do.

And not even Mr. Ashton said anything to me — like, "You bloody bonehead, try shutting your mouth and opening your mind."

If he had, I wouldn't have taken it amiss, because it would have been a decent marching order and a fair reprimand.

As it turns out, I was touched by Mr. Ashton's words.

Here they are:

"I look forward to your paper every week as it gives a lot of local news and happenings. But I found that Roger Williams commentary — week of May 21-27 — was disturbing. If a young person read it, (it) could make them afraid to go to school next year. It is unfortunate that there is an economic turn down across the country that is effecting services including schools. Maybe if Roger

Williams took an approach of trying to (find) a solution. Like getting qualified retired persons that would be willing to donate time, a couple of hours a week, to teach art, music or what ever. This would help in maintaining quality education for our young."

Here's the part I didn't agree with — that last week's commentary might scare away young people.

First, I don't think any young people would read it. And second, if they did I think they would break into wild laughter, wad up the page, and throw it at the nearest sibling.

I live with a couple of young and voracious readers: one's 7 and one's almost 14. And even they wouldn't bother with a 1,000-word column (they read novels, not the old man's columns), unless they knew there was blood in it to start with. I'm not going to tell them.

Furthermore, they wouldn't wade through the rather "deathless prose" that I frequently build into these things (a phrase one of my grandfathers actually used a time or two). Not unless chocolate or ice cream or both were at stake.

Or unless I asked them to. And there's no way I would ask the younger one. It might scare the heck out of him, or something a lot less acceptable than the heck.

What Mr. Ashton said that rings my bell like a big hammer, is that I could have suggested a solution to the problem of school cuts, instead of going Hollywood on him.

I've thought a great deal about solutions, since I spend part of three or four days each week — at least a few minutes and occasionally longer — with my first-

grader, in his school.

I believe to the bottom of my soul that the only way to help children is to help them. To be with them. To get in there somewhere, physically and mentally, even if you're just standing next to them. And not just to talk about it, or look for somebody else to do it for you, like teachers.

I didn't do that with my oldest son, who is now 29, because I wasn't there. That was a mistake.

He ended up writing for *Florida Weekly*, and, well — it's embarrassing to have someone survive your mistakes, be nice about it, and then do better than you.

One of the greatest wasted resources we have, I believe, is working in Publix. Or driving out to the diner for the early-bird special. Or waiting for a call from their kids in another state. Or growing a small garden in the back yard. Or dressing for the symphony, then offering the music such rapt attention that even God couldn't be more studious. Or wondering what they'll do when they retire, before long.

Nobody is asking them to be with the children.

But I am now.

I am asking teachers and administrators to invite them to classrooms. I'm asking them — and you, Mr. Ashton — to go to the nearest elementary school and volunteer for something.

I'm asking that we all pitch in with the little people, just once a week or once a month or once a year. Then we can let the old world roll away on its own — blood, deathless prose and all, and be done with it.

What do you say? ■

"True teamwork means everyone wins."

— Andy Davis, Management Trainee

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