Adeste Fideles!
A Proud Word for Critical Thinking

By Solomon Davis

Each generation doubtless feels called upon to reform the world. Mine knows that it will not reform it, but its task is perhaps even greater. It consists in preventing the world from destroying itself. …In a world threatened by disintegration, in which our grand inquisitors run the risk of establishing forever the kingdom of death, it knows that it should, in an insane race against the clock, restore among the nations a peace that is not servitude, reconcile anew labour and culture, and remake with all men the Ark of the Covenant.

- Albert Camus, December 1957

Critical Thinking may be one of the most difficult courses you take in your undergraduate career. Believe me; few classes have more value to the life you lead. If you truly apply yourself, you will walk away with a stronger sense of yourself and the world around you. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur often describes our lives as a narrative—a story in which we continually define and redefine who we are.1 Through this narrative, each of us engages, constantly, in “seeking his or her or its identity.”2 Within the story of our lives, we face turning points that give us the opportunity to change the plot, so to speak. Critical thinking gives you another tool in rewriting your personal story. You can break free, with courage and dignity, from “the crowd” and define yourself without “arrogance, fear, or hate.”3 The ability to think critically spills over into the lives we lead, our relationships, and our psychological health.

Personal Revelations

I always like to share a personal story, and it is significant in that it teaches us the value of critical thinking in our everyday life. When I left

graduate school, I spent a great deal of time trying to find steady employment. I bounced from job to job—I had supported myself through school working grocery and construction—and I had a great deal of difficulty finding a full-time teaching position. I re-married in 2002 after moving to Seattle, and split my working life between full-time employment as a grocery manager and part-time teaching. Frustration can eat away at our soul—the feeling that we are not getting what we “deserve” in life—and I fell victim to that feeling. My wife had listened to me complain, probably too many times to count, about how my genius was not appreciated, about the nuances of academia, about how an unsympathetic world devalued education and the learned. Finally, one day as I was complaining about the amount of money so many—in my opinion—unlearned (and by this I meant those who lacked “higher education”) and undeserving people were making, she said (and my wife is an incredible salesperson and mentor): “do you feel that way about me?”

Like a hammer’s blow, a turning point in my narrative had descended upon me.

**Adeste Fideles!**

My advisor in graduate school would often say *Adeste Fideles*, which means, roughly, “get your head in the game” (“Be present, O faithful”). I realized that my head hadn’t been in the game—that through “bad” thinking I had narrowed the world to my view of it, instead of realizing that while circumstances may not always be ideal, they can change with effort. Worse, my narrow view had hurt the one to whom I owed, and owe, the greatest respect and faithfulness. Herein rests one of the great values of critical thinking, and I want each of you to glean this: critical thinking is not some “nuts and bolts” intellectual exercise; critical thinking is the constant evaluation and reevaluation of who we are, what we do, what we think, and how it all translates into our deeds and relationships. When my wife “called” me on my comments, a new world opened for me. This is the value of being open—another important lesson learned from critical thinking.

As members of a free society, each of us has the responsibility and capacity to think critically. Critical
thinking is a process of dialogue, whereby we engage in questioning and deepening our understanding of issues, but critical has another, equally important meaning. When we say that this or that issue or event is critical, we often mean that danger or risk surrounds the issue or event. As developing critical thinkers, each of you can learn to accept that risk, to ask the “hard questions.”

First, we need to ask these hard questions because, as adults, we have set aside the trust of our infancy for the realizations of a responsible life. Caveat emptor—let the buyer beware—does not only apply to our relationship with car dealers and refrigerator salesmen, but to our relationship with the news we watch, the papers we read, the politicians we hear, and, yes, even the teachers who teach us. Ask the hard questions. Demand consistent answers. For any free society to function, a courageous citizenry must ask, it must demand, and it must participate. By doing so, we return to the meaning of critical thinking as dialogue, whereby we discuss issues in an open manner without blind trust silencing us or making us cower before majority opinions that we might find offensive. Musician Frank Zappa once noted that it had never bothered him “…that thirty million people might think I'm wrong. The number of people who thought Hitler was right did not make him right.”

Second, we need to ask the hard questions of ourselves. Who am I? Why do I think the way I do? Am I being fair? Do I have all the information, or am I “picking and choosing” that which supports the view I already have? Am I being “one of the crowd,” or do I stand apart? When we accept the challenge of critical thinking, we can arrive at some profoundly disturbing realizations of ourselves, as I discovered in myself. Once we do so, however, great opportunities for personal growth emerge.

Critical thinking is also creative thinking, allowing us to rewrite our personal narratives in fundamentally important ways. “All greatness,” wrote Albert Camus, “…is rooted in risk,” and he continued:

Great ideas, it has been said, come into the world as gently as doves. Perhaps then, if we listen attentively, we shall hear, amid the

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uproar of empires and nations, a faint flutter of wings, the gentle stirring of life and hope. Some will say that this hope lies in a nation; others, in a man. I believe rather that it is awakened, revived, nourished by millions of solitary individuals [my emphasis] whose deeds and works every day negate frontiers and the crudest implications of history. As a result, there shines forth fleetingly the ever threatened truth that each and every man, on the foundation of his own sufferings and joys, builds for all.\footnote{Albert Camus, \textit{Create Dangerously}, Lecture presented at University of Uppsala, Sweden, December, 1957.}

Each day, the “cruelest implications” of history confront us—of prejudice allowed to continue in the name of tradition, of making excuses for injustice because we lack the courage to question those who make the laws, of following orders and accepting our beliefs because those around us do the same.

\textit{Labels and Conformity}

As I have written, courage distinguishes the critical thinker from the everyday thinker, and that courage will benefit you in other ways. Two further points will make this clearer.

First, a critical thinker has defense against becoming an ideologue, or of falling victim to \textit{thoughtless conformity}. We tend to love labels and accept their comfortable numbness like a familiar blanket: Right-wing, Left-wing, Conservative, Liberal, Atheist, etc. We all need to question, very carefully, what it means to accept such a label. What are the implications of saying “I’m a conservative”? Typically, ideologues subsume an entire set of implications into such a label, including, for example, opposing abortion, accepting traditionalist arguments in defense of gun control, welfare reform, prayer in schools, gay rights, taxation, free speech, etc. Your role as a critical thinker is not to accept labels, but to question every belief “packaged” within the label—no matter what the label is. A label is easy—it allows us to vote the “party line” without reflection, to watch the “right” news broadcast, to read the “right” papers, to feel comfortable and justified when things go our way and—worst of all—\textit{feel indignant when they do not}.

Second, the critical thinker has defense against submitting to an “anything goes” or relativistic view of issues and events. I might like the 1969 Firebird, and you might like the 1971
Torino. In this case, what I like and what you like are entirely personal and we should not be battling over which of us is right or wrong in our choice of favorite automobiles. Your opinion is just as valid as mine is. However, not all opinions work in the same manner. For example, if I were to say, “Slavery is okay in such and such a culture, but it’s not okay here,” I am committing relativism and abandoning my potential as a critical thinker. We also see relativism paraded in the disguise of political correctness: “Hey, live and let live, right?”

Wrong. Each of us as critical thinkers has the responsibility to call foul when a foul should be called. An analogy is helpful here. Relativistic thinking blinds us to fairness, and we often take our views as correct while dismissing other views. “Well, you have a right to your view, but I’ll take mine.” I am from a little town in Colorado called Las Animas, and, for the sake of argument, let us say that I only give good grades to students who know that Rocky Ford cantaloupes are the finest cantaloupes in the world, that Medina’s Restaurant made the best tamales, and that Black Bridge was the best party spot. Obviously, very few students are going to get a good grade. While I am not being fair, if you accept the relativistic, “anything goes” view of things, you have to accept your poor grade. “This isn’t fair!” you might say, but as a relativistic thinker (as opposed to a critical thinker); you cannot say this and be consistent. Fairness assumes the presence of objective rights and wrongs—relativism does not.

Now imagine relativistic views of racism, sexism, justice…

We have the duty as human beings in a free society to make choices, and critical thinking gives us a tool by which to make good choices. A critical thinker has the courage to judge decisions and to make moral choices—and the courage to risk others confronting us with the decisions we make. If I tell you that female circumcision is wrong, but that the circumcision of male infants is permissible—you, as a critical thinker, should rise to ask me, “why one and not the other?” Challenge me. If I accept your challenge in the spirit of dialogue, I reveal a positive aspect of myself. If I refuse such a challenge, or I resort to “stock” responses or relativistic answers,
I have revealed a negative aspect of myself—and I should be held accountable for it. Evaluate. Judge. Be fair and open-minded. These are your responsibilities as a critical thinker.

A Proud Word

At the end of the day, we return to our personal narratives. I will issue the challenge that each of you begin taking the steps to think critically—to engage life with an open mind and to engage life with a full understanding of the risk and personal sacrifice we take upon ourselves in leading a meaningful and rich existence. Viktor Frankl often quoted the lines, “What you have experienced, no power on earth can take from you.” Our pain, our failures, our successes all lead to changes in our story, and critical thinking helps us assign meaning to the changes. We learn from pain instead of allowing pain to weave us into an increasingly insulated and resentful cocoon. We mitigate our joys with the realization that such joys need to be savored, for the joys may pass. We learn that maybe we were not entitled to this or that, but that perhaps we have to earn this or that.

As you consider the text of your life, and as you consider the role of critical thinking within that text, I urge each of you to embrace the risk. Do not just exist—thrive. To accept the labels that you place upon yourself or that others place upon you is to surrender your potential, and opens the door to a life lived quietly and unremarkably between the hours of waking in the morning and going to sleep at night. As I learned, “the discrepancy between what one is and what one could be generates a flood of self-contempt with which the individual must cope throughout life.”

Adeste Fideles. And should we meet and my opinion not “jive” with your opinion, let’s talk…
