

# Today's American Left are '60s leftover radicals

In a summer saturated with sequels, Robin Williams's delightful film "Dead Poets Society" is a thought-provoking change. Williams creates a memorable character, Mr. Keating, a talented and irreverent Prep-school literature professor.

Teaching in an institution that was unconcerned with things of the mind, Keating made the mistake of encouraging his students to "suck the marrow out of life" by thinking deeply and feasting upon poetry.

Keating's efforts were frustrated by the school's suffocating orthodoxy, which was personified by the Dean, a hybrid of Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor and Gletkin from Arthur Koestler's "Darkness at Noon."

Keating was eventually dismissed, but he infected his students with a hopeful contagion.

Hollywood is a community that is quite allergic to originality. Accordingly, a sequel to "Dead Poets Society" may be inevitable. "Dead Poets II" could chronicle the exploits of Mr. Keating's real-life counterpart, Walter Lammi of Stanford University.

Walter Lammi is a former '60s radical who got better. Like many refugees from that childish decade, Lammi has decided to put childish things aside and to repair some of the damage done by his erstwhile comrades. When he graduated from Stanford 20 years ago, Lammi was a Maoist. By his own admission, there wasn't a riot he didn't attend. As a graduate student he had the good fortune to study under Irving Kristol, who had made the pilgrimage from socialism to conservatism himself during the 1940s and 1950s. Under Kristol's tutelage, Lammi grew to political maturity; he was transformed from a radical to a liberal.

A brief digression is necessary here. Classical Liberalism was founded upon an appreciation of the free market and the institutions of ordered liberty. Contemporary liberalism draws heavily from the nihilistic radicalism of the late 1960s and the early 1970s. It is aggressively hostile to the institutions that classical liberalism sought to defend.

As much as any American university, Stanford embodies contemporary liberalism. Two years ago a mob marched on campus chanting, "Hey, hey, ho, ho, western culture's got to go!" The march was led by Jesse Jackson, who is radicalism incarnate.

Lammi persuaded the Stanford faculty that the university's well-advertised tolerance should make it possible to offer a course on modern conservatism. The faculty agreed, and Lammi inaugurated the course, which was entitled "Principles and Practices in the American Conservative Movement."

It was his intention to expose students to the works of thinkers like Burke and Toqueville, as well as more contemporary writers like Russell Kirk, Allan Bloom and the late Sydney Hook.

Lammi was able to attract 15 students — all of them disgruntled conservatives who were weary of the stifling liberal orthodoxy at Stanford.

Some of the students brought horror stories. One of them, Karen Berk, had been part of a sorority that had planned a dance around the theme of "Cowboys and Indians." The faculty was aghast at the sorority's racial insensitivity; the sorority cancelled the dance and apologized.

This was not enough to placate the faculty; the school's Dean for Fraternity prescribed a stern regimen that included lectures on Indian traditions, slides of reservation life and further lectures on racism, prejudice and the evils of race stereotyping.

Perhaps an apology may have been reasonable. But Stanford's faculty reacted in a fashion that brought to mind Orwell's "1984" — the faculty was seeking to prevent "thoughtcrime." It is not unreasonable to suspect that Stanford has already tossed John Wayne down the memory hole.

Stanford's motto appears to be, "Why can't you, too, be an emancipated, forward-looking, non-conforming liberal independent, just like everybody else?"

This phrase appeared in an essay written in 1965 by social commentator Peter Viereck. Viereck penetrated the rhetoric of individualism and creativity that shielded the New Left of the 1960s. What he found was a movement bound by an orthodoxy more unforgiving than the one it sought to replace. He found non-conformists marching in lock-step.

Today, liberalism is a great barrier reef formed from the skeletal remains of unreliable assumptions. Some of those assumptions remain part of the catechism of the left. There are many who still believe that western wealth is the direct result of third-world suffering; that the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer; that the Constitution mandates a wall of separation between church and state.

Walter Lammi is one of many who are provoking an examination of the well-established and poorly-examined assumptions of the left.

Like Mr. Keating, he is encouraging students to think for themselves in an environment largely hostile to independent thought. His efforts deserve to be memorialized in a movie. Alas, Robin Williams wouldn't be interested in the part.

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