

April 1, 1989 (Vol. 4, no. 14)

Dear Colleague:

Some young American children were watching a film on Eskimo life. They found the scenes strange but enchanting until they came to the part where the Eskimo boy who, having ensnared a gull with his father's help, stoned the bird to death. The children were horror struck. One girl, Kathy, blurted out, "He's not even human, doing that to the gull." The class was silent. Then another girl, Jennine, said quietly, "He's got to grow up to be a hunter. His mother was smiling when he was doing that." The class ended up admiring the Eskimo boy for doing what he had to do "with what they've got" (J. S. Bruner, Beyond the Information Given, p. 449).

As a graduate student at UC-Berkeley, I knew a Chinese student from China, whose English was still hesitant. Despite the language handicap, he did excellent work in botany and was on his way toward earning a Ph.D. degree. I caught him on campus one day relaxing under a eucalyptus tree with a paperback. What was it? I asked. He showed me: it was an anthology of Greek myths. He said that even as a student in China he was fascinated by Greek mythology.

The human mind is extraordinarily able to transcend its own cultural and geographical environment. That's why we have UW. But this ability needs nurturing. For this reason, I am delighted that at UW we have instituted an Ethnic Studies course requirement for all undergraduates. Some narrowly motivated students may object, but the best students will not. I can just see the astronomy majors and the macroeconomics majors delighting in sidetrips to ethnic courses. Their intellectual diet will be enriched. Ethnic courses and minority students on campus will be a wonderful new resource for mainline Euro-American students. But what about the minority students themselves? How will they benefit? Why is it I seldom hear the administration urge that minority students enlarge their world-view by pursuing (say) Greek myths and genetics? How is it we don't urge them to be exploiters for a change? Why don't we say to them, here is UW: don't rest content with what you already have in your pocket, but rather go out and exploit what is out there--help yourselves to the gold in Memorial Library, in geography labs, in courses on nonparametric statistics and critical theory?

Best wishes,

