

April 15, 1989 (Vol. 4, no. 15)

Dear Colleague:

"In 1968, Doug, a fifth-grader at Madison's Franklin Elementary School, decided to join the Black Panthers. Doug was white." (Isthmus, April 7-13, 1989). Rather than imply, as the reporter seems to do, that Doug failed to recognize a racial distinction, why not say that he succeeded in transcending the limits of his own race? Doug, though white, imaginatively sees himself as a glamorous Black Panther. Why not? Why attribute the adult's self-imposed limitation, ideologically based, to an uninhibited child? Why should the child be limited by his own race, his own group, his own upbringing? Why can't he say, with Walt Whitman, "I am large, I contain multitudes"?

A few years ago when I taught at another university, genealogy came into fashion. Everyone seemed to be searching for ancestors and roots. So I did the same. As an Asian American, I felt an obligation to do so. But I did not stop with my great grandfather; I did not stop with Confucius. The portrait I hung up in my office was that of a grinning skull belonging to Homo erectus (Lan-t'ien), who lived about 300,000 years ago. Suspecting that there is prestige in the length of one's ancestral line, I decided to go as far back as I can. Having my ancestor up there on the wall did, I confess, give me a sense of self-identity. At the same time, it reminded me that I probably share that same ancestor with a million other human beings. I felt simultaneously unique and at one with a large segment of humankind--indeed, with all humankind. Isn't this what a liberal education is about? By pushing back the limits of space and time, by losing ourself in a greater whole, we gain paradoxically a heightened and liberating sense of self.

One of my favorite plays is John Wesker's Roots. In it, the young woman Beatie wants to find her roots and wants her family to help her in her search. When her mother mentions the obvious--her ties with the family farm and its folkways, Beatie explodes in anger and shouts: "God in heaven Mother, you live in the country but you got no--no--majesty...Your mind is cluttered up with nothing and you shut out the world. What kind of a life did you give me?" Of course I am in favor of the family farm, but I am also in favor of the world--the world that used to be confined to the sociopolitical elite but which is now open to all of us at the University.

Best wishes,

