

## Dead Poet Wisdom

A film review by Leland R. Beaumont

It is fun and instructive to consider the film *Dead Poets Society* the struggle of wisdom-inquiry seeking to emerge within an esteemed fortress of certainty and tradition.

The prestigious Welton Academy inducts the freshman class using banners highlighting their four pillars: tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence. Newly arrived English instructor John Keating guides the students toward other values. Knowing the importance of developing autonomy during adolescence, Keating encourages curiosity, free thinking, passion, creativity, risk taking, and challenging authority. When instructing students to rip the introductory pages out of their text book he tells the conflicted students, “this is a war and the casualties could be your hearts and souls”, “Words can change the world”, “We read poetry because we are members of the human race and the human race is sustained by passion”, and “the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse.”

Using the phrase *carpe diem* Keating demands his students “seize the day” because soon “we are food for worms.” We must become wise enough to decide what is of value in life.

Standing on the desk to attain a new viewpoint, Keating asks each student to stand on the desk as he explains: “we must constantly look at things in a different way, the world looks very different from up here”, “consider what *you* think”, and “You must strive to find your own voice”. He then challenges each student to “write your own poem”, write anything, “Just don't let your poems be ordinary”. When shy Todd Anderson returns to class claiming to have no poem, Keating insists Todd “Begin with my barbaric YAWP” as he skillfully elicits a genuine poem from the heart of the surprised student.

A marching demonstration provides a lesson on the insidious attraction of conformity. Although each student began with their own stride, synchronization soon emerges as they conform to a common cadence. Despite the difficulty in maintaining his own beliefs in the face of conformity, each must find his own walk.

Keating also understands that adolescence is a time to practice socialization while exploring sexuality and love. Knowing the students are “full of hormones” he explains that “language was developed for one purpose—to woo women”

Inspired by Keating and the risk-taking he encourages, student Neil Perry initiates a revival of the secretive Dead Poets Society. The members begin to learn from their fun and exploration. They begin each meeting reading from Henry David Thoreau:

“I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life! To put to rest all that was not life, and not, when I come to die, discover that I had not lived.”

The members come alive as they discover and explore their humanity.

Guided only by tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence, the students failed to gain the judgment expected of more autonomous adolescents. This inexperience combined with their newly unleashed creativity allowed several students to overstep boundaries.

Charlie Dalton—after playing his sonorous sax—announces to the Dead Poet Society members that he published a school paper editorial demanding girls be admitted to the Academy. The editorial was signed only by The Dead Poets Society. The administration considers this a serious assault and demands to know the author. Charlie stands up at the inquisition and takes a phone call from God, requesting that Girls be admitted. Not even Keating was amused by this stunt.

Knox Overstreet recklessly and clumsily pursues the popular and attractive Chris and quickly gets in over his head when he steals a kiss from her in front of her boyfriend, gets beat up, declares his love for her, and continues to stalk her.

Neil Perry auditions for the lead in a play, disobeying his father's demands that he eschew extracurricular activities and concentrate on his traditional studies. Unmoved by the standing ovation the performance earns, Neil's father is furious at his disobedient son and sternly scolds and shames him. Neil resorts to suicide as his way out.

Reacting to the tragedy, Headmaster Nolan coerces each Dead Poet Society member to sign a statement blaming and condemning Keating. Students recognize "They need a scapegoat" and "we [the students] are the victims." Citing the honor code one student advises "You can't save Keating but you can save yourselves."

Wisdom-inquiry cost John Keating his job. It could have been worse, both Socrates and Jesus of Nazareth lost their lives promoting wisdom.

In creating modern learning environments we need to meld the discipline and memorization required by traditional knowledge-based courses such as chemistry, Latin, and trigonometry with the exploration, risk taking, creativity, fun, and passion required for wisdom-inquiry.