

Afterthoughts



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At one point in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, the protagonist speaks directly to her readers, exclaiming: "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand in you what things are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family...from what is Chinese?". I feel much the same as I ponder what of my life, my outlook and my achievements are rooted in my years at CCDS, from 1968-73. So much of what I became – an intellectual, a political progressive, a writer and teacher – were first defined in those crucial years, from second to seventh grade, but what, out of that, was CCDS, my quirky family, the 1960s? Which were my own proclivities, inherited from my beat generation birth parents whom I grew up, to my adoptive parents' horror, to resemble? Just as the eccentricities of individuals pick up and reflect the colors of the surrounding social environment, it is impossible for me to make out what elements of my experience at CCDS were a product of the school's traditional emphasis on independent inquiry and character building, and which were reflections of that period's celebratory rejection of received assumptions.

Growing up marinating in both, I assumed that they were the same – that independent inquiry turned on exuberant free expression, that a strong character manifested as energetic rejection of formulaic thinking. Only in my

forties, as I reconnected with CCDS through issues of *Connections*, have I realized that just as one family in a given culture may be quite different from another steeped in the same traditions, a school may differ radically from one cultural epoch to another. CCDS's valorization of intellect and character remain reassuringly constant, yet the assumptions that flow through today's CCDS concerning intellect and character seem, to the eye of one formed at a different moment, or, if you will, by the eccentricities of a different family in the same culture, subtly different from those I imbibed from my teachers years ago.

The 1960s were a good time to be at CCDS. Meanings were in flux, destabilized, contested, and the school's traditional values of intellectual independence and personal character reflected the intensity and passion of debates in the larger society. Two or three epochs down the road, those debates have been not so much resolved as silenced. The images of coffins returning from an ill-defined and disastrous war that launched an anti-war movement in the 1960s have disappeared, although the coffins and ill-defined wars have not. The anti-war movement, for that matter, has also disappeared from our television sets, although not from our streets. We live today, it would seem, in a world devoid of consequential questions in need of debate. If someone wants to debate them anyway, there's a free speech area two miles away from the podium set aside for that sort of thing.

When I was twelve I heard an older student sing these lyrics, written by John Prine, at a CCDS talent show, and they struck me with the force of revelation: "but your flag decal won't get you into heaven anymore – they're already overcrowded from your dirty little war, you know Jesus don't like killin', no matter what the reason's for, and your flag decal won't get you into heaven anymore."

I am just guessing, but I doubt that today these or similar lyrics would seem quite so perfectly to exemplify the school's communal commitment to intellectual and ethical independence as they did to me that night in 1971. Within our society as a whole, the values of intellectual independence and of character predicated on such independence seem, for the moment, to be hanging in a self-referential void. Yet even now, matters in urgent need of debate that have been quietly set out of sight are, in the way of repressed things, returning with a vengeance. In an emerging epoch, in which passionate debates are of necessity breaking out again, it is my hope and conviction that CCDS' traditional emphasis on intellectual integrity and character will continue to mutate, producing a new generation, a new family, bringing together the school's legacy of intellectual and personal integrity with the particularities of a new phase in the life of our society.