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CULTURAL COMMENTARY: TALENT

BY BARBARA APSTEIN

A flurry of activity known as “drop-add” marks the beginning of each academic semester. For two weeks, students who want to switch classes or change majors are busy filling out forms, finding professors and procuring signatures. While some students come to college without the faintest idea of what they want to study, many others think they know, and then, after a semester or two, change their minds. It’s not unusual for students to switch two or three times before finding the major that “fits.” Those of us who teach the required general education courses can see this change coming; something “clicks” for the student who discovers a talent for, say reading and writing, admits “I didn’t expect to like this course,” and eventually becomes an English major.

The young Mozart probably did not need to be ordered to practice the piano before he could go out and play.

For highly gifted people, talent is easy to recognize and doesn’t need much encouragement. The young Mozart probably did not need to be ordered to practice the piano before he could go out and play, Picasso probably did not need to be cajoled to paint, and the teen-aged Michael Jordan probably did not need to be convinced to consider a career in basketball. But such obvious talents as theirs are very rare; for most of us it can take a long time to discover whether or not we have a talent for anything.

Author Frank McCourt, for example, was 60 before he wrote his first book. After having spent 30 years teaching in various New York City high schools, McCourt sat down to compose *Angela’s Ashes*, his vivid memoir of an impoverished childhood in Limerick, Ireland. *Angela’s Ashes* became a best-seller and won a Pulitzer Prize. The recently completed sequel, *Tis*, has received glowing reviews and appears to be just as successful.

Some kinds of talent can be expressed only at a certain moment in history. Such appears to be the case with Internet entrepreneur Jim Clark, founder of Silicon Graphics and Netscape. According to a recent *New York Times* article, Clark’s early years did not presage a bright future. He grew up poor and, having been expelled from high school as a troublemaker, enlisted in the Navy, where he was assigned to a menial job at sea. When he returned, he took a Navy math test and received the highest grade in the class. His boss, recognizing his talent, encouraged him to go to college, and eight years later he had earned a Ph.D. in computer science from Stanford University. His current worth is estimated at several billion dollars.

Talent is one of those words whose current meaning, “a special natural ability or aptitude,” is far removed from its original one. In the ancient world, the talent was a measure of weight. One could speak of a talent-weight of gold, silver or brass as we might speak of a pound or kilogram. The Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks and Romans all used the talent as a unit of measure, although the exact weight of a talent varied considerably: the Royal Babylonian talent averaged about 65 pounds, while Greek talents weighed closer to 50 pounds. The famous statue of Athena which once stood in the Parthenon was said to contain 40 talent-weight of pure gold – about 2,000 pounds.

Over time, “talent” also came to refer to a unit of money – the value of a talent weight. Thus the Babylonian silver talent was equal to 3,000 shekels. From Greek, “talent” was absorbed into the Latin vocabulary as *talenta*, the plural of *talentum*, referring to a unit of weight or money. From Latin, “talent” worked its way into French and thence into English.

MILTON’S SONNET XVII

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my
soul more bent
To serve therewith my maker, and present
My true account, lest he, returning, chide,
‘Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?’
I fondly ask; but Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies: ‘God doth not need
Either man’s work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best; his state
Is kingly—thousands at his bidding speed
And post o’er land and ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait.’



The goddess Athena: an ancient copy of the great statue that once stood in the Parthenon. The original statue was embellished with 40 talents of gold – worth about \$15 million today.

It's not always easy to pinpoint when and why a word undergoes a radical change in meaning, but with "talent" this shift is clearly understood: its present meaning, "natural ability or aptitude," can be traced to a single highly influential text, the New Testament parable of the talents, which appears in differing versions in the gospels according to St. Luke and St. Matthew. In the parable, a master who is going on a journey entrusts different sums of money (talents) to three servants: to one he gives five talents, to the second, two, and to the third, one, "to each according to his ability." A talent represented a significant sum, equal to the wages of a day laborer for 15 years. The first two servants "traded with" their talents and thereby doubled their money, but the servant who had received only one talent buried his master's money in the earth. When the master returns, he praises the two "good and faithful" servants who have invested the money entrusted to them, but condemns the one who buried his single talent as a "wicked and slothful servant." The master reproaches him, saying "you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest." Thereupon the "worthless servant" is cast into the outer darkness.

To a contemporary reader, the master's reproach might seem undeserved. Given the fact that the master did not leave any explicit instructions about what to do with the money, the third servant's decision to take the fiscally conservative route might be seen as the prudent course. After all, investment always involves risk and the first two servants might easily have lost their money instead of doubling it. Yet on the symbolic level, the meaning of the parable is clear. God, symbolized by the master, will judge his servants on how they used those talents which they were given. From early

Christian times, talents became associated with the gifts and innate abilities with which God endows His human creation, with individuals receiving varying amounts. Talent was something divinely entrusted to a person for use and improvement.

The English poet John Milton pondered these two distinct meanings of "talent" when, in 1651, he composed the well-known sonnet on his blindness, which begins, "When I consider how my light is spent [i.e., has failed]." Milton believed that God had granted him the gift of poetic genius and destined him to write a great poem. Yet at the age of 42 he was completely blind, his great poem as yet unwritten. How could he accomplish this task, being unable to see? In the first part of the sonnet, Milton uses the parable of the talents as a way of questioning the divine purpose. Alluding to the third, slothful servant, he writes of "that one talent which is death to hide" but which, because of his blindness, is "lodged with me useless." He fervently wishes to serve God "and [like the servant in the parable] present/My true account, lest he returning, chide [criticize]." But how can he? "Doth God exact day labor, light denied?" the poet asks.

In the second part of the poem, Milton answers his own question, through the voice of a personified "Patience." Patience reminds the poet that God doesn't really need Milton's work, since God has no shortage of servants: "thousands at his bidding post and speed/O'er land and ocean without rest" to do His bidding. Firmly, decisively, Patience concludes: "They also serve who only stand and wait." This answer clearly represents Milton's way of coming to terms with his terrible affliction. He will "stand and wait" for divine guidance.

In the centuries between Milton's time and our own, the way in which talent is understood has changed dramatically. As the science of genetics developed, it became clear that talent is largely inherited from one's parents. We are not surprised when musicians' children show musical ability or when athletes' children demonstrate athletic superiority. Yet the conviction that talent should be used and not wasted remains strong.

For many students, the most pressing task of their early college years is to figure out where their talents lie. After having followed a prescribed school curriculum for twelve years, they are suddenly confronted with choices. Despite near-universal grumbling about general education requirements, these first and second year courses give our students time to consider new options, as well as time to distinguish between their own academic inclinations and their parents' expectations and ambitions. One of the advantages of the American system of higher education is its flexibility, the fact that, in a world where academic choices have become increasingly numerous and complex, it allows for second chances.

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