

# *Who* are the teachers?



Welcome friends. Welcome to Chicago. I am so very honored tonight to be with you - and honored for the privilege of being able to sing for you and to make a few remarks on this opening night of the Community College Humanities Association conference. Our subject of course is “The Humanities and Civic Engagement.”

Back in May, when Bob Kolar first contacted me about the possibility of joining you here, the subject, “The Humanities and Civic Engagement” made me think for a very long time. I hadn’t been given such an assignment from a teacher in a lot of years.

How many of you live in Chicago? Or the Chicago area?

How many of you have lived in Chicago for more than ten years?

Twenty years?

Were any of you living in Chicago in the 1950s?

Did they have a better parking system then?

Those of you with a long memory may recall a man named Win Stracke, a Chicagoan. Win was prominent in Chicago in the 1950s as a singer and entertainer. I met Win when he was eighty

years old and living in a retirement home up north of here. Win had a saying and it goes, “When your memory goes... forget it!”

Win was a powerful singer with a deep bass voice. He came of age as a performer in the 1930s. With hard times going on all over the place, Win enlisted in the progressive movement of the day. He joined a theater company called The Chicago Repertory Group, which was an improv group. Incidentally, Studs Terkel was also a member of the group, and he and Win became lifelong friends.

The Chicago Repertory Group traveled to different places, mainly union halls in those days. The group had created a number of simple scripts with places in the program to improvise with members of the audience. The skits were short. They were intended to be funny and light. A few songs with easy choruses for the rest of the audience to join in on, and so forth. The material incorporated names of people, and events specific to the current issues, be it an organizing campaign, a negotiation, a strike or whatever.

The content of the program was aimed at demonstrating a set of social values which would engage those in attendance. The action of staging an improvised skit with union members in the cast, by design, embedded these people - through song, narrative and role play - directly into the very essence of their own cause.

The Chicago Repertory Group's work as performing artists, activists and as *teachers*, validated these workers' struggle - and validated their lives in meaningful *artistic terms*. And this is what I understand to be the important part. The workers' lives and struggle were validated in *artistic terms*.

Are you union members? Have any of you out there ever been to a union meeting? Or perhaps sat through a lengthy negotiation, wondering if you might still have a job on Monday when the strike vote was taken?

It's tough business. Very quickly the dialogue surrounding labor-management relations becomes polarized by economic reality and political division. The Chicago Repertory Group stands as an historic example of individuals who chose *art* to express the parameters of a particular social circumstance. They chose art.

Win told me that story when he was eighty-one years old, and I learned from it.

Here's another one.

Over the years Win's career as a singer and performer blossomed. He was all over the radio and television. He made personal appearances and gave concerts and sold Maurice Lenell cookies. And then the political climate in America became difficult for people like Win, for people who believed in the things Win believed in. The Red Scare of the 1950s cost Win his

network job. It cost him his career. In the end, he was very proud of the way things turned out, I think. He spoke in that way.

He said, “All at once I had a little more time on my hands. I had been thinking of starting up that folk music school, which had been in the back of my mind for some time.” And when Win met the talented musician and instructor Frank Hamilton, he knew his school would become a reality.

By the 1960s folk music and folk rock had swept through the consciousness of young people all over America. The summer of 1968 found the Democratic National Convention being held right here in Chicago at the old International Amphitheater. Hundreds of protesters showed up at the convention, demonstrating against the war and the draft. Mayor Daley - the first Mayor Daley - countered by exhibiting to the protesters gathered, to the DNC and the nation, the collective might of the Chicago Police Department and the Illinois National Guard. Tensions grew. The night erupted.

Among the many things Mayor Richard J. Daley is remembered for, is his quote during the rioting and burning. He said, “The police aren’t here to cause disorder, the police are here to preserve disorder.”

And just like the Haymarket affair some eighty years before, few agree on the events that led to the horror of that summer here in Chicago.

I was just a boy when all of this took place. I remember my father a few weeks afterwards, taking us for a drive to the area near Halsted and 43rd. He wanted to show us where this had all happened. He wanted my brothers and me to see, and to have some experience with the place where this piece of sad history had occurred. He didn't make a comment. He drove slowly as I remember; and I remember my brothers and I looking through the car window, trying to drink in the meaning of his solemn and somewhat bizarre history lesson.

Win told me this story from that same autumn of 1968. When classes resumed at the Old Town School of Folk Music after summer break, students were gathered in the lobby just before the first night of class, chatting, having coffee. Practicing. Tuning. He noticed a fellow, who was an acquaintance - and an off-duty Chicago Police officer - over in the corner picking bluegrass guitar with a long-haired young man in a flannel shirt. They didn't talk, they just sat there hunkered over their instruments picking out "The Nine Pound Hammer" together.

"Two weeks before," said Win, "they may have been beating each other over the head with rocks or a billy club. Their meeting demonstrated to me almost better than anything," he

said, “the power music has to unite people.” Win said he was always most proud of that moment. He said, it made him think the Old Town School of Folk Music may have been a good idea after all.

I learned from that.

So now I have been a teacher at the Old Town School for twenty-three years. I often reflect on experiences like the ones shared by Win, and others. Those experiences inform me to this day. They help remind me why I am there, and why I am here tonight. They remind me of what I am supposed to do. And as I reflect again on the subject, “The Humanities and Civic Engagement,” I ask you to join me in asking, “Who are the teachers?”

Had I been assigned to read those stories about Win in a text book when I was in high school or community college, chances are the lessons in those stories may not have had such an impact. And the chances are I wouldn’t have done the assignment at all. I was busy playing ball then, trying to figure out how to play a guitar. I was doing all the things eighteen year-olds do.

When I met Win, I was twenty-eight and learning to become a teacher at the Old Town School. I was learning to become a working, performing artist. And our brief friendship helped to shape the course of my life. It helped to change my life. It

helped me to focus my teaching. It informed and gave greater purpose to my creative pursuits as a young musician.

Where other friends and colleagues in music pursued fame in Nashville or rock stardom on the club circuit, I found myself being called back home again and again to the artistic context provided me by people like Win Stracke.

Who are the teachers?

One goes to Nashville to try to write hit songs because that's what they were instructed to do. One dreams of pop stardom and auditions for a slot on American Idol because that's what he or she was instructed to do. One survives the grueling road life of a touring rock musician because that's what they were instructed to do and sometimes, they don't survive.

It is regularly modeled to our young people and to our communities that greed and excess and dishonesty are okay so long as you can get away with it.

Who are the teachers and what are they teaching us?

Many of our business leaders, many of our political leaders, many of our religious leaders, many of our leaders in science and medicine - and in the media - will only speak to us in marketing keywords, or prepared sound bites. They often will only speak to us through a screen, or through their attorney. And they speak mostly in wholesale terms held over from a generic

ideology that has little to do with teaching us how to become more complete human beings.

In our apprenticeship, when we are not careful as learners, we may mistake this ongoing glop of electronic hype and turbocharged infotainment for the kinds of authentic experiences which nourish a healthy curiosity - the kinds of experiences which feed and lead youthful desire towards a productive and responsible - *and creative* - adulthood.

Who are the teachers and what are they teaching us?

Right now, across the airwaves and around the world, debates are taking place on whether the polar icecap is melting or not. Nations hold international conferences to negotiate the acceptable level of poison that can be ethically put into the food we eat and the air we breathe.

Well, I'll tell you what else we are losing besides the polar icecap and the promise of clean air.

In these times of tweeting and texting and FaceBooking; in these digital days of data and information overload and the iPod shuffle; I'll tell you what else we are losing.

We are losing sight of what it is to be a human being.

What does it mean when children no longer know how to sing "B-I-N-G-O," or "She'll Be Comin' Around the Mountain," or "This Old Man"?

What does it mean when an individual can have two-thousand FaceBook friends and not be able to call out to five of his neighbors by name?

What does it mean when celebrity status has come to represent the highest level of achievement in just about any field?

What does it mean when an important election or a political debate is presented to us as if it were another goddamned game show?

What does it mean when the health of our economy is measured by the prospective wealth of investors instead of the long-term well being of working people?

And who's gonna fix all this?

Well, I'll tell you who the only people are who are capable of fixing it.

The teachers. That's who.

*Written for the keynote address for the Community College Humanities Association Conference, 2009.*