

AS THE CROW FLIES

By Stephen J. Schlegel

I've had a crow on my shoulders most of my life. He's steely-eyed and alert most of the time. Sometimes he's on my right, sometimes the left. When I do something he doesn't like, he'll whack me with a beak to my skull. No fun, those times.

I call him Bill. He didn't like that during the Clinton Presidency but he's always answered to it and I'm not going to change his name after all these years.

Some folks have Hawks on their shoulders, some have doves. Hawks on the right. Doves on the left. Carnivores

and Vegans. War and peace. I have my crow and he's been just fine.

My high school class president was Bill Bright. No kidding. And my own personal crow is a bright Bill. He has been a great "baloney detection device".

He's concerned with solving problems linearly. "The shortest distance between two points, a straight line".

The distance, for instance, between the southernmost city in Florida, Key West, and the northernmost,

Pensacola, on the map, in a straight line, "geodesically" is 524 miles. The shortest distance by road, however, is over 792 miles. ¹

¹ Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia 9.6.2014

My crow Bill doesn't travel by road. I just had the experience of driving my sister back to her home in Texas for the winter. She had spent the summer in Michigan. Bill wouldn't get into the car, and was waiting for me in Texas, fully rested chiding me for not flying.

The Chicago Literary Club has been a charitable institution, promoting matters of literature, literacy, and community well-being out of a sincere and correct belief that literature, and literacy itself, is necessary to individual and community quality of life. Reading and writing; essential and good.

In the first ten years of my law practice, I did some criminal defense work. I hung around with some criminal

lawyers, some prosecutors, some defense, and some of whom became criminal court judges.

One common element existed then, and exists now, between the vast majority (over 90%) of first time gun violence felons, that's murderers and other shooters.

Very few...almost none, read above the 5th grade level.

All my criminal court colleagues agreed that one of the most disturbing factors was that the offenders rarely expressed any emotion or acknowledgement that what they had done was wrong, or any fear of prison or penalties of any kind. The vast majority of those charged

and convicted were 23 or under and male. No reading skills, no path to freedom, just a path to jail.

At the same time, in 1978, I began to work with some of the Boys and Girls Clubs in Chicago, specifically the Union League Boys and Girls Clubs, Established in 1919, have grown to serve over 13,000 underprivileged members annually, now in 9 locations, some in public schools, and with a summer camp in Wisconsin. The organization is on par in terms of size with the Chicago Boys and Girls Clubs. Both organizations are members of the Boys and Girls Clubs of America.

We have an elevator speech to describe the work of our clubs at the Union League. We are proud that 98% of our

members graduate from high school, that there have not been any criminal convictions over the last many years and that there have been no teen pregnancies among our large membership over the same period.

Cawl?...I know Bill, I'd better get to the point.

Illiteracy is directly co-related to crime. Everybody knows that, don't they? I suggest they don't, or at least are not willing to admit it, based upon the dominant bird on their shoulders. The hawks say the police should put them all in jail. The doves just fly around with olive branches in their beaks preaching for a better attitude among all men, but assuming all are literate, understand and hear them.

When I ask Bill, as I do frequently, what to do? he has simply said "Caw" which means, "fly straight" in Crow.

We have all been blessed with what Frederick Douglass understood to be his pathway from slavery to freedom. We have all learned to read, and we read pretty well.

We were variously blessed, not with parents necessarily of great wealth, but of great and passion for reading. My parents came from families that knew great poverty both before and during the Great Depression. But my grandparents knew Douglass' pathway to freedom, and

were passionate readers. They were determined that their children follow the same path. It's not much of a leap to venture some variation on the same circumstance is true for every member of this club.

Reading is, in human historical terms, a new skill, sometimes fought for against the wishes of unkind and fearful governors and certainly Mr. Douglass' early masters.²

At the time of the Christ, 97% of the population had a life expectancy in the vicinity of 24 years, whereas politicians

² Sagan, Carl *"A Demon Haunted World"* Ch. 21 *"The Path to Freedom"* pp 365-367 Ballantine Books 1996.

and priests in the temples lived modern day life spans.

Only governors and priests in the temples could read and record in the languages of the times.³

With literacy and the advance of technology has come an immense pile of increasingly complex data analysis and educational research. In the eighties we began to review some of that research as part of our work with underprivileged children in after school programs at our Boys and Girls Clubs. My crow Bill kept pecking on me to require that children spend time in programs of reading and homework help before athletic activities took over a proper amount of their energies. Bill's insistence has

³ Bora, Marcus, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, passim.

worked well in our clubs' efforts to provide positive after school programs for at-risk children.

In the early 90s, U.S. Department of Education national surveys found our country had more than 40 million barely literate adults. Many other estimates were even worse. By 1996 the literacy of young adults had slipped dramatically in just a single decade. It continues to slide 20 years later.

Only 3 to 4 percent of the population scored at the high reading levels we in this club enjoy. Virtually all in that

percentile had graduated from college. Only 4% of our reading peers were living at poverty levels, whereas over 43% of those at the lowest reading levels were poverty stricken. And...(Bill pecks me to point out), surveys since the mid-90s paint a continued disturbing downward trend in all the correlative associations between reading levels, poverty and wealth, health, ...and violent criminal activity.⁴

You will recall that the progression of handgun on street murder levels increased to historical highs over the last

⁴ Sagan, Carl, *supra*, p.357

decades of the last century, despite federal and local governmental efforts.

Once my own mother had succeeded in putting her children on Mr. Douglass' path to freedom, she came to perform after school tutoring to young children having difficulty keeping up with their schoolmates. As a result of her example and experiences, I came to simply preach about the positive curative effects upon those children's' futures and the presumed effects upon the quality of community life. I came to be confident that homework help at our clubs would set ever increasing numbers of young people on their own path to freedom. But the crow on my shoulder continued to be skeptical.

In 2004, I came to read a little more and learned of the work of the National Center for Family Literacy in Louisville, Kentucky. With a foundation of research into the effect of various tutoring programs on illiterate poor families in Appalachia, the Center implemented programs aimed at low-income families to teach both children and their parents to read. All of the research pointed to success when parent and child were together at tutoring sessions.

It seemed incredible to me that with all the statistical evidence as well as the common sense fueled by our own

experiences that it took so long to recognize that apples don't fall far from trees. Where you find a child who is having trouble learning to read, you will likely find a primary parenting figure who cannot read either. The highest single factor in predicting the highest academic level a child will reach, across the entire spectrum, is the highest level reached by the primary parenting figure. There are a few Frederick Douglas's' out there, but very few of them.⁵

Essentially, these programs have the child, the parent or grandparent or guardian begin to learn together, in a

⁵ Sagan, Carl, *supra*, p.361

school setting beginning when the child is 3-4 years old, a few days, a few hours, each week.

Follow up studies of 14 of these programs have been uniformly and remarkably positive. Not one of the children had to repeat any grade in elementary school.

The effect upon the lives of the parents has been no less dramatic, with the passing of high school equivalency tests, some college admissions, and overall better financial status and quality of life. Freedom, indeed.

When it comes to violent crime, we think primarily about boys. Statistics bear this out, with about 95% of juvenile homicides committed by boys. In fact, boys perpetrate 4 out of every five crimes that end up in juvenile court.

They account for almost 9 out of 10 alcohol and drug law violations. Accidents, homicides and suicides are the first, second, and third causes of death among boys in their mid to late teens.⁶

Caw!...No, Bill, I do not digress.

⁶ Kindlon, Dan and Thompson, Michael, *Raising Cain*, Random House, 2000

Some Boys and Girls Clubs (including ours) have been chosen and granted funds to run a program of tutoring to children 4 to 8. One on one, in their public school, aimed at making sure the children read to a third grade level by the time they are third grade age. This is based upon the statistic that if a child attains that grade level at that age, he is unlikely to encounter the criminal justice system by the time of majority. If he or she does not attain such reading level by that time, he or she has a 75% chance of being involved in the system as a defendant or a victim. Our funds don't come from the Department of Education, but instead through the Justice Department, but this is not to quibble over which government agency

makes the effort. For the boys and girls our clubs serve, it is a step forward toward peace and progress in their community, but it doesn't get to the underbelly of the problem, and that is identifying the parents of the children who will not progress as hoped and providing reading help in the family context.

(You see, Bill, I'm trying to stay on flight plan here).

Last spring, I attended the national meeting of Boys and Girls Clubs of America on the west coast. Since I flew to San Francisco, Bill attended, too. He likes to fly

commercially whenever possible. It's cheap, comfortable and easy for him. And, he actually likes the nuts they sometimes serve.

After three days of meetings among leaders of local clubs throughout the country and around the world, somewhat tired, but stimulated by the discussions, we flew home.

Sitting next to us was a gentleman who identified himself as a professor at an MBA program at Carnegie in Pittsburgh. We talked briefly about work and travels.

Half an hour or so in the air, we were quiet, and he turned to me and asked if I would mind if he asked me a personal question. He asked what I believed was the single most important thing that I could do to improve our lives. I was surprised at this stranger's directness and simplicity. He wasn't challenging, he was merely asking with sincere interest.

Bill was staring at me as he sometimes does. I surprised myself with the reply. I said, "I would like to have all the medical professionals involved in the delivering of babies to identify the reading levels of pregnant mothers, and be able to refer those who are illiterate to post-natal

social service training programs that include reading training.”

The professor was quiet for a couple of minutes. He then turned to me and said that in his field he studied and tried to teach folks to implement their ideas with solid business plans. My job was to figure out the direct manner of implementation. Make a plan. No small task. The devil’s always in the details.

Six months have elapsed since that plane ride. In our greater Chicagoland communities we continue to

experience the frustrations of gun violence

predominantly perpetrated by frustrated boys and young men; most illiterate, most poor.

Immense effort and financial resources, both public and private, continue to be deployed to improve an ailing educational system. A lot of them deal with youth education and family literacy issues. That has been the case for years. I found within some old research sources a report of Education grants of the Chicago Community Trust that reflects that in just one month of 2002 the trust awarded 23 grants totaling over \$2,345,000 to various grantees to improve literacy programs in one

manner or another. And the resources applied in these areas by that trust alone have expanded since.⁷

We are told, variously, that although there have been some 650 murders in Chicagoland this year, that rate is “better” than it has been since something like 1965, So, what’s the problem? And if there is a problem, what’s the most direct manner of solving it?

Education researchers have widely concluded that pre-natal and post-natal health and family care programs are very successful in breaking the family cycle of illiteracy

⁷ Chicago Community Trust Report of Educational Grants, September, 2002.

and the problems associated with it, and there are many such programs available in cities throughout the country that are enjoying the successes they are fostering, including of course, Chicago.

And, if we cast the newspapers aside and actually look at what is being done, we know there are many such programs available to parents and their children if they can just get there and participate. All well and good, and all insufficient to bridge the gap that is widening between literate and non-literate members of our society.

The Boys and Girls Clubs programs seem to be successful in helping members to stay in school, graduate from high school and lead law abiding lives. The problem with all those successes is that we reach only those children who come from the families who know the path to freedom is through learning how to read. Illiterate parents who are attempting to raise children are not the parents who usually bring their children to Boys and Girls Clubs or other after school programs. Not to blame, just a fact, says Bill.

There has been much speculation over the proposed Presidential library. Bill has been quiet on the matter

until now. Our President is a most literate person. He had us read two books he published about his life. He was elected with a background of “community organizer”. We all wept with him over the death of a wonderful young girl within a short crow’s flight from his Chicago residence. A death caused by a gun in the hands of a boy.

Within the last month an essay dealing with these problems appeared in the Sunday Review Section of The New York Times. The author’s chronicle the effects of social service programs delivered to pre and post-partum mothers “at risk” as we say. Some programs involve

nurse visits and show the remarkable effects that changing dietary habits have on the ability of a child to be even minimally literate, as well as the social cost of behavioral problems that are chemically induced in utero. All involve continuous support for the mothers for two years after the birth of their children. The authors convincingly argue that donors, governmental and private, will get a huge bang for their bucks if these programs are funded further. They posit directly that \$1 billion presently given indirectly, to support for profit universities annually, would be much better spent by supporting these programs, and they make a valid argument that economically, overall, the investment is

positive from the start as measured against the direct cost of the services the programs provide.

The library proponents talk of the site of the library, with the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois-Chicago, among others, vying for it. Apparently, a library to house all the president's papers and memorabilia for historians to pour over to determine some truth about what happened during a president's term, and why, is of great value to a university. Claims have been made that it will bring money from interested tourists from all around the world and help improve life in our community. Against this backdrop, James Heckman, a

Nobel Prize winning economist at the University of Chicago has posited that “our society would be better off taking the sums we invest in high school and university and re-developing them to help struggling kids in the first five years of life”.

The communities of Englewood, Chatham, Austin, South Lawndale, Little Village and others to various degrees are underserved where the services we have been talking about are needed most.

When Bill and I see they wish to raise over \$100 million dollars to build and maintain such a library, we see why the universities would like to have the real estate investment on their campuses. We also know, however, that if the real estate had a social service center that would have pre-and post-natal health and literacy programs, and after school programs for the children, the Boys and Girls Clubs could serve hundreds of at risk kids with significant non-governmental funding. We would crow if the President would condition the establishment of any such library upon the provision of such programs as one of his main legacies to the

communities he would have us organize after he leaves office.

I'm just saying, as we say, and Bill says thanks, and "Caw"!

Thank you, all.

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