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What Are We Really Doing Here?

By Andrew Pudewa

Adorning our humble office, there are two things that always brighten my day and help restore my focus—a map and a pile of papers. The map is an ordinary, somewhat faded Rand McNally World, but what makes it special are the forty-six pins representing the forty-six countries where we have sent Excellence in Writing materials. In every state of the U.S. and on every continent (excepting perhaps Antarctica), we have been privileged to support families and educators who are striving to do something exceptional, making the necessary sacrifices, and searching out ways to teach their students the most important thing in today’s troubled world—how to think and how to communicate.

The pile of papers is tall and ever growing. It consists of correspondence from many of the families and individuals represented by the pins on the map who have felt compelled to share their excitement and joy: Struggling students have grown into competent and confident communicators. Years ago when I began this work, I was often surprised—and delighted—to hear that the Structure & Style approach was so educationally successful, but today the real effects of this work are becoming much clearer.

As I look at the map and occasionally pick up a letter from the stack, I am filled with hope against the odds. With elections approaching, it is so easy for me to slip into despair about the obvious lack of true leadership in our country. Sadly, the empty rhetoric constantly spewing from pundits and politicians makes it easy to imagine that indeed this is “The End of America,” as Naomi Wolf puts it, and we look in vain for those who will speak the truth powerfully and persuasively in this world of lies. But I can see that now, unquestionably, there is a new force rising. We are part of something much, much greater than “improving basic skills” or “preparing our students for college.” We are engaged in the great work of empowering a wave of young people who will not only have access to the truth, but will have the means and the motivation to boldly enter the war of ideas, employing powerfully the spoken and written word.

Although perhaps hyperbolic, it is said that Churchill defeated Hitler by “mobilizing the English language and sending it into battle.” How? The prime minister’s grandson explained it this way: His “unshakable resolve and puckish sense of humour ... galvanized a nation that hung on his every word.” Ideas have consequences. Will we, in our time of need, have another Patrick Henry or Winston Churchill, whose rhetorical skills, combined with an uncompromising grasp of truth, can mobilize and motivate a complacent people into action and preserve our God-given rights and freedoms? I believe so. I believe that we will have many. Perhaps some of them are now sixteen, or twelve, or nine years old. Perhaps some of them are behind the pins on my map and have their names on the letters in my stack. If so, I will not be surprised.

The Greek poet Euripides was possibly the first to note that “the tongue is mightier than the blade,” and Jefferson echoed this when he exhorted Paine: “Go on doing with your pen what in other times was done with the sword.” We now must exhort each other; let us continue to train our students in the use of this great weaponry—the skills of written and spoken English, so that when the crises arise, we will have a force ready to wield the word of truth. This truly is our great work, our Magnum Opus, and this is what we are really doing here.