

WORD LAPIDARY: ROADSIDE PEBBLES NOW SHINE WITH POIGNANCY

The essay which became the hidden reason for this “In My Own Words” is entitled “Cooke’s America, Explored in Wartime.” It appeared on the front page of the New York Times on May 24, 2006 and tells us that soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the young Alistair Cooke, who was then a reporter for the BBC, “too to the road” to see what was going on in the American homeland and what Americans outside the circles of government thought about the war. But his observations and documentation were not used during the war and after the war was over, were considered “old news.”

Neatly stored in a closet in Mr. Cooke’s Manhattan apartment, they were found six decades later by an assistant who was sorting his papers just a few weeks before Mr. Cooke’s death in March 2004. No longer considered old news, the Atlantic Monthly Press recently published them in a book entitled *The American Homefront: 1941-1942*. In other words, the passage of time gave these observations and interviews a poignancy which was not apparent when they were freshly conceived.

Which brings me to the two boxes of notes and documentation I hauled out of my clothes closet a month ago in order to deposit them with the Sophia Smith Collection on the History of Women at Smith College, a wonderful repository for all things related to women’s history. The boxes contained notes, letters and essays on something I first conceived of in 1986, and then repeated twice more in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, entitled the Artist-of-Lie Award. The catalyst for the concept and for the awarded was actually a word that does not exist in the English language, and as is often the case, when a word does not exist in a language, the connotation or concept which the word denotes also does not exist in the culture which speaks that language. And so, the culture goes on doing what it does and believing what it believes, never knowing what it does not know. Aha, I hear you are saying to yourself: I think I know where she going... But, before you jump to conclusions, let me give you the word which started this whole train of thought. The word is “Lebenskünstler.” It is a German word and connotes a person who approaches life with the zest and inspiration of an artist, although he or she may not be working recognizably as an artist. In other words, he or she may not be a painter or a musician, but she approaches the canvas of her life with an impulse for self-expression and an intense desire to know, regardless of monetary reward. Furthermore, this attitude toward life is lifelong. There is not built-in obsolescence. It makes for happiness and satisfaction throughout life and does not wear out until the body does. Her own innovations, inspirations, experimentations and devotions enliven her and others, regardless of age.

Of course, I have met “Lebenskünstler” in the United States, too. But without the word and the concept, and therefore the validation which the word carries, these wonderfully creative and exceptional individuals are often unrecognized and easily considered, or even worse, consider themselves as marginal unless and until the likes of Oprah happens to come across one of them and gives her a public validation. No wonder there is such pressure to be seen on TV **when the culture has no way for individuals to intrinsically validate themselves.**

Literally translated into English, “Lebenskünstler” means Artist of Life, and, in 1986, I set out to comb the United States for women, aged 60 plus, who personified Artist-of-Life qualities. My daughter Elizabeth and I peppered the nation with news releases explaining our search, which was not easy to do because American culture, except in Kindergarten (another German word), divides word and play as separate entities. But somehow we communicated successfully because we received some 2,000 responses. The first response came from Bangor, Maine. I remember it clearly. Though I need to add that what helped us communicate 20 years ago were the then still many small town papers, i.e., the “Bugles,” “Sentinels” and “Standards,” which had not yet been taken over by large, national conglomerates—and these local independents got the point and brought our search without fanfare and promotion to just the right women living on the “homefront”—and they even spelled “Lebenskünstler” correctly.

Our Application Guidelines stipulated that the “Artist of Life” had to be first described by someone else who knew her well. Then the nominator’s description of the nominee had to be sent to us. And if the prospective nominee seemed to have the right stuff, we then asked her to write us directly and to describe herself “in her own words.” The “we” I am referring to was the Artist of Life committee: Nancy Lloyd, D.H. Melhem, Gail Sheehy, Leo Lerman of Condé Nast publications, Rosemary Paver, Melissa Sones, Ainslie Dinwiddie Grannis and Gail Weigel of the National Council on Ageing.

I am very glad that I still have this summary paragraph: “The final candidates,” I said, “all shared the following characteristics: personal authenticity, productivity, resilience, zest for living, optimism and hopefulness, giving of self, decisiveness, making discoveries, making lemonade out of lemons, open to new ideas, able to do many things at once, living what the profess, liking challenges, forerunners of their time, rising above adversities, living embodiments of true values, dedications to lifelong learning, indefatigable spirit, living life in an extraordinary way, inspiring by example, ability to see beauty finding delight in simple things, being able to start over at any age, finding the extraordinary in the everyday, down-to-earth wisdom, respect for the past, living in the present and looking forward to the future.” It wasn’t easy, but we chose three First Price Artist-of-Lie winners. Dr. Benjy Brooks, an innovative surgeon obstetrician. Rita K. Chow, a registered nurse working in leprosy colonies. And Marjorie Swann, a Quaker/pacifist. Award ceremonies were in a private club in Rockefeller Center.

But the passage of time, even though just 20 years, also brought an increased poignancy to our Artist-of-Life papers, as it did to Alistair Cooke’s documentation of the American homefront. For example, in 1986, our first Artist-of-Lie candidates were primarily born during the first 30 years of the 20th century, i.e., between the First World War and the Depression. All of them remembered the Depression and the harshness their families had to overcome. In addition, however, some of them remembers attending one-room schoolhouses, which not, to us, seem very long ago. However, to the next two batches of candidates who applied during the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, one-room schoolhouses were no longer a memory.