**You Say You Want a…What?**

**Academe students take on Revolution and Reform**

The class of ninth graders stands in a large circle, speaking to each other in pairs: tongue twisters, staccato syllables, and then the poem “London” by William Blake, which they repeat line by line with dramatic expression. They are actively engaged with one another and with the teacher, who encourages them to perform the exercises with gusto:

*In every cry of every Man,*

*In every Infant’s cry of fear,*

*In every voice: in every ban,*

*The mind-forg'd manacles I hear*

“Now *that’s* how you get ready to revolt,” says Ben Roosevelt, a member of the faculty at Academe of the Oaks, a private high school in Decatur. “If the conditions of society are such that many people feel oppressed, then there’s going to be a problem. Look at what happened recently in Egypt, Libya, and Syria!”

This is Roosevelt’s class on Revolution and Reform, a staple of the Waldorf high school curriculum. In keeping with the carefully structured Waldorf approach, it’s no accident that this course is taught to freshmen.

“Ninth graders have strong opinions, strong sympathies, definite likes and dislikes,” Roosevelt says. “They are rebels themselves, or they think of themselves that way. So this is a chance to see what real rebels do.”

Rather than survey the subject throughout history, scratching the surface of many different events, Roosevelt opts instead to dive deep into three landmark moments: the French revolution, the Cuban revolution, and the American civil rights movement. To lay the groundwork for understanding, the students study major philosophers and Enlightenment thinkers such as Rousseau and Locke, who reshaped ideas about natural and human rights. “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains,” wrote Rousseau, commenting on the way governments tend to interfere with the natural right of liberty.

In a class discussion about the French revolution, Roosevelt challenges students to think beyond easy assumptions and consider the real-life circumstances of the people involved. “Is every rich person guilty of oppressing the poor just because they happen to be rich and from a certain class?” he asks—an interesting question to consider even today. “Is it moral to use violence in fighting for freedom?”

The French revolution is a great starting point, Roosevelt says, because it is considered modern in the way it united educated members of the bourgeoisie and working-class peasants for a common cause—at least, at first. Things got complicated after that. “The people who were revolting were after very specific things and had concrete ideas about how it should work, although they didn’t agree with each other once the reality of governing a country set in,” he explains. “Even so, one of the most important aspects of the French revolution is that people began to think of themselves nationally, rather than as followers of a particular ruler, which is very different. The old allegiance to a social system and hierarchy was shifting. These revolutions overturned old ways of thinking about society.”

A highlight for the class is role-playing, when students assume key historical roles, research their parts, and act them out together. The emphasis, says Roosevelt, is on effective public speaking—a skill that never goes out of style. Students who may not shine as brightly on paper can find themselves to be great orators, boosting their confidence and their understanding of the value of well-studied communication in all forms.

“I thought the Revolution and Reform block last year was very interesting, and I enjoyed learning about different revolutions throughout history,” says an Academe sophomore about the class. “Personally, learning about the French revolution and all the events leading up to it was my favorite topic during the block. Having recently read *A Tale of Two Cities* in English, it was fun to see how certain events from the book ended up tying in with what we were learning. Hearing about the Cuban revolution and the civil rights movement was also incredibly fascinating, and I learned a lot from the class discussions.”

When the class moves on to the Cuban revolution, students have the chance to see how the elements that can lead to revolution—the “recipe” for revolt that they have learned about—are applied in a situation much more recent and closer to home. One of the important lessons of Cuban history involves the complex character of Fidel Castro, who was both an idealist and an inspiration to the people, but also a forceful dictator who eventually deprived them of free speech, private property, and access to economic opportunity.

“He was not at all a good guy, but not a totally bad guy either,” Roosevelt says. “The students need to be able to see how things are not always one extreme or the other, not always so easy to judge. It can be complicated. Revolution can change society for the better in some ways and harm it in others.” Going back to the French Revolution, he describes how the radicals who took over the government were responsible for executing thousands of dissenters while also planning for one of the first public education systems. In Egypt’s recent revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood helped depose an authoritarian ruler, but then they took steps to consolidate power for themselves.

Finally, the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s shows students how reform can be effected from within the system without destroying it. “We look at how the status of the African American population in the US at that time was similar to that of oppressed people in France,” says Roosevelt, “and how certain dedicated persons were able to make the American government change the law by using nonviolent methods.”

Judging from students’ positive reactions from the class, there’s hope that the Beatles were right—we really do all want to change the world.

“Revolution and Reform helped me see the dynamic of the human race,” says another Academe sophomore. “I learned of the power that a single human being can hold, and how that power is used, whether for freedom or tyranny.”