

An Open Letter to Educators

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This op ed is addressed to my fellow academics (though I hope the rest of you may also find this interesting and will want to keep reading).

It's about Richard Dreyfuss. It's time we paid attention to what he's been saying in public forums around the country. This actor who played Mr. Holland, the inspirational music teacher, has something to teach the rest of us about education.

Google Dreyfuss's name and you get exactly what you'd expect on the first page of links: the predictable references to his roles in "Jaws," "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," and "Mr. Holland's Opus," along with snarky lines about the "irritating pests and brash" characters he's played. Dig down a little deeper and there are the stories about his more recent movies, from Oliver Stone's "W" (Dreyfuss played Dick Cheney) to the romantic comedy, "The Lightkeepers," which begins a national run next spring.

But the 16th link -- on the day I performed a Google search -- turns up an article about civics. Yes, civics, a subject that conjures up images in black and white of bored students, the flag, a blackboard featuring a diagram of the three branches of government, and an imperious old fart of a teacher on the order of Severus Snape, the malicious "Harry Potter" evildoer.

It turns out that Dreyfuss mostly retired from acting the better part of a decade ago to devote himself to the study of civics, a subject he believes is vital to the survival of the United States as we know it. Today he lights from one end of the country to the other railing on educators for neglecting civics.

I am tempted to call him a modern-day Paul Revere. But a better image -- one we are apt to take more seriously than the over-mythologized Revolutionary War hero -- is Matt Hooper, the marine biologist Dreyfuss played in "Jaws" who nobody wanted to believe. Dreyfuss is a natural Cassandra. He brings to this final real-life role the passion that gripped moviegoers a generation ago with his performance in "Jaws." Only now it's

not the people of the little town of Amity Island he wants to help save. It's the future of the United States. Dreyfuss argues that the schools have so largely given up the study of civics – a majority of public schools no longer teach the subject – that we are in danger of slipping back into a modern-day Dark Ages even as we plug in our headsets to our iPhones and download the latest apps. Reason, the Enlightenment, civil liberties – all of those bedrock American verities – are at risk because our young no longer are taught to treasure them.

Everywhere he speaks the response is invariably enthusiastic. Google “Dreyfuss” and “Bill Maher” and you’ll see. In a stunning appearance on the comedian’s show in 2006 the studio audience sat in rapt silence as Dreyfuss fluidly warned that we risk returning to an age of superstition and fundamentalism where people stop thinking for themselves. Either we teach our kids to respect reason and civil liberties, he cried, or we can “kiss this thing good-bye.” At that the audience erupted in cheers.

Dreyfuss is largely waging this battle alone. His Dreyfuss Initiative, as he calls it, operates on a shoestring budget. This is tragic.

His friends are doing what they can to assist – at the end of this month most of the ticket sales from a special screening of “The Lightkeepers” at a Cape Cod theater will be going to the support of his civics cause. But if he’s to gain traction for the Dreyfuss Initiative he needs our help. This is, after all, our fight as much as his.