

## “DON’T BLAME ME - I VOTED FOR JACK”

---

Bill Jay

Once upon a time, I wanted Jack Stuler to be like me....

When we first became colleagues - way back in the waning years of hippiedom (1974) - Jack Stuler and I were not professionally compatible, to put it mildly. The transformation in my respect for Jack and the principles he espoused was one of the “learning curves” of my academic life. In order to explain this change I need to briefly note the reasons for our initial differences.

In that year I was brand-new to teaching in the USA, having spent my professional career in England - editing magazines, directing an arts center program, picture-editing for a national journal and an international picture agency, professional lecturing, and generally poking my finger in every photographic pie and stirring it around. I expended a great deal of effort in a mistaken notion that I was making a difference.

On arrival at ASU I was charged, primed, ready to change things, Jack included.

Jack, however, had a different background and agenda. He began, and ended, his professional life at the same institution where he had received his graduate degree, and had little photographic experience outside a single campus. He was a genial but diffident person and his congenital shyness, laid back, non-intrusive and non-confrontational style was an affront to my activism. I wanted him to get involved. He resisted. He needed a placid place, a quiet emotional retreat, in order to devote himself to his primary obsession, making art.

Jack wanted to keep things as they were.

He resented my pricking, goading, pushing, bullying. His attitude was clear: go ahead, bang your head against the brick wall of administrative indifference, waste your time on developing that abstract thing you call a program, divert your energies into the uncaring system - and see where it gets you - but leave me alone, because those organizational goals upset and distract me from my one basic need, to create photographs. Here was a battle of personalities and goals.

Jack won.

But I was a slow learner. It took years for me to understand what Jack knew all along, that institutions do not repay initiative and activism because they are incapable of loyalty or even recognizing the effort; that building systems which bureaucrats delight in dismantling is a waste of time; that creating for self is a renewing, regenerative and, yes, a communal act, the well from which good teaching springs ever-fresh; that the teaching experience, without this well, is bereft of inspiration and personal interaction.

So while I was punching illusionary holes in the miasmatic fog of academic bureaucracy, Jack was quietly, doggedly, determinedly being a photographer. I remember one astonished undergraduate rushing into my office and exclaiming with awe: "We have just had a 7:40 am class and Jack came straight from the darkroom with a tray full of wet prints that he had made before we got there!" In such circumstances it matters little what Jack did for the program or what he said in class; he had demonstrated, unwittingly, that photography has the capacity to enthuse and inspire over a very long period of commitment. Jack acted as a photographer, and that in itself was the life-lesson. He taught his students, with action more than exhortation, that just living your life, if it is full of passion for what you profess, is the best education of all.

But, of course, the academic-powers-that-be would never understand this lesson because their rules, regulations, memos, committees, hierarchies, systems, budgets, political machinations, agendas and all the useless minutiae of their joyless lives cannot conceive of value in the creative act of art or education. Their existence is predicated on the notion that if it is pleasurable, and useful to the students, then it must be wrong and should be stamped out of existence. They take perverse satisfaction in discovering an activity of rare satisfaction, sucking it dry of the juices of life, and then kicking around the dead carcass.

Jack has not been rewarded by the system. Surprise, surprise. How could it be otherwise?

When I look back on Jack's life in academia, the reminiscences of another Jack (Welpott), one of his peers and a similarly accomplished photographer and educator, ring true:

From the day I was hired I began cultivating a reputation within the Art Department of being a sort of a flake. I found that after a year or so of losing track of my committee assignments, forgetting to answer memos and missing departmental meetings - well, after a while they just stopped asking me to do all those things.

This was quoted in a fine little book called *Art and Fear*, by David Bayles and Ted Orland (Capra Press, 1993, p.85). It carries the subtitle: *On the Perils (and Rewards) of Art Making*.

Well, yes... there are perils in not being a collegial committee-hack, as Jack knows full well and to his cost, financial and otherwise. Jack has been in academia long enough to know how the system works. He knew that pursuing his art would incur penalties while those who do not practise what they preach would be rewarded. He did it anyway. That takes moral courage, rarely seen on campus or anywhere else.

There is one other - the most important - consequence of Jack's devotion to photography and rejection of the politicized academic system. In all the endless meetings I have

attended, rarely, if ever, are the needs and wants of the students a factor in any decision. By contrast, it is impossible to talk to Jack about anything without hearing him refer to a student's work, relate a student anecdote, take pride in a student's artistic growth, reminisce about past students' accomplishments, worry about a student's troubles. He cares, and it shows.

And the students respond. Students are no different from the rest of us, they like complaining. But in the more than twenty years of being his colleague I have never heard a student complaint about Jack Stuler as a person or a teacher.

We, as faculty, have been told that the university is no longer a center of higher learning, dependent on the interaction of students and teachers, but it is now a Corporation and that we are the workers on the assembly line, stamping widgets as they pass by. As ridiculous, stupid and myopic as that notion might be, it is believed by the administration and, because of their self-appointed Corporate power, we have to live with it. Fair enough, so perhaps this Corporation should start listening to its paying customers, the students.

If it did, it would learn an uncomfortable fact: Customer Service Representatives (faculty) like Jack Stuler are trusted and respected by the Consumers (students) - which is more than can be said of the managers and administrators. Will this change? No. Does it matter? If you are Jack Stuler, the answer is still No because the wasted time in a doomed effort at change would distract from the making of art. And that price-tag is way too high.

Jack Stuler is first and foremost a practicing photographer of high attainment. He just happens to practice his art in front of students in academia, where he lives in the cracks, keeps a low profile, circumvents obstructions, and ducks when another clod of administrative nonsense is hurled his way. And perhaps that is the most subversive attitude of all.

...one day, when I grow up, I want to be like Jack Stuler.

\* Jack Stuler was a graduate student under Van Deren Coke and was appointed to the faculty at Arizona State University where he developed the photography program. He was the senior faculty member when I arrived at the university in 1974. This appreciation was written to accompany a retrospective exhibition of his photographs which his students had organized in order to show their respect for his work and his mentoring - and to protest his treatment by the administration.