

## OF ACADEMIA AND MOVIES

Chocolat - I liked it. Chocolate – I like it even more.

Pardon me for not remembering any of the fascinating names of the French characters. I share this “thing” with foreign names with one of our political leaders. Drop an “e” from “chocolate, and presto, English becomes French, a sign of a mother language for all. Most likely, elements of the primordial soup were food, water, air and Chocolat.

The story is based on a simple, moralistic and common theme: Rituals corrupt the sublime. The story, of the late 1950s vintage, is told through the tribulations of a nomadic, unconventional, honorable, young, unmarried Chocolateer and her young daughter. They wander, one cold windy winter night, into this serene, conservative, predominantly Catholic French outpost. It is anticipated that, these visitors, especially the Chocolateer would not be welcome. Therefore, this outpost, is conveniently placed near a riverbank so that her kindred spirits might rush to her aid and comfort, as would be needed. Her initial days in this village might be compared to the first fortnight Malcolm X might have had as a Cabinet member of a Republican presidency. The mayor is the most formidable opponent to her homesteading. A basically good and simple man, he wields his considerable power and control over the village citizens with self-defined compassion, like a miniature DeGaulle. He devoutly believes that Rituality is Spirituality. Thus, the ultimate sin is eating chocolate during lent. So, driven by, divine inspiration, his mission is to seek and destroy the source of sinful temptation. But, alas, he forgets his battle armor- his mouth guard. The inevitable happens: A spec of chocolate lands on his lip. The last and most powerful bastion of power opposed to her stay in the village, now overdosed on Chocolat, is converted into a welcome mat. God does work in mysterious ways. Hallelujah, all villagers are now redeemed. Incidentally, the mayor, during his failed mission inadvertently established a connection between the spirit and the palate. In mathematical form, it can be stated as:  $E = mC^2$ , where E= Epiphany, m = mass of Chocolat consumed and C = speed of consumption. Theoretical physicists- Eat your hearts out.

Watching a simple movie permits, and even promotes, meandering, without missing a beat. About 30 minutes into the movie, I took the last sip of my soft drink. I realized that I had just paid \$3.35 for an ice-filled 20-fl oz reinforced paper-container containing a few gulps of colored, flavored, carbonated water. “Greed is good”, I remembered from another movie, and wondered if its creators set these “desert” prices for movie-theater water. Then, as the screen elaborated on citizen plans to rid the village of this bold, convention-defying Chocolateer gal; I was reminded of my own highly and ever increasing ritualistic academic world. Efforts at teaching improvement, a perennial academic nirvana, came to mind first. Over the last several decades, like the inevitability of fashions, new mantras appear on the academic runway. On a regular basis. In the 80s, “Competency-based” curriculum was the savior; in the 90s it was called “Outcome-based”. “Chant these words often enough and education will improve”,

admonished the prophets, their hearts filled with joy that soon their pockets would be full of money. In spite of all this, I, in youthful arrogance and ignorance, rejected these slogans as word pollution. In new millennium, there are two new and contemporary saviors: “Evidence-based” and “Assessment-based” curricula. E-based curriculum got me. Evidence – I know this word. The day I heard about this curriculum my self-confidence plummeted like the recent NASDAQ. That night, now older and weaker, I woke-up in cold sweat with the nightmarish thought: Is it possible that my entire education was non-Evidence based? “Please God, let it not be so”, I prayed then and again, this time, with the parishners of the French village, who appeared to be praying for unlimited chocolate

Research enhancement is a second academic holy grail. A few years ago, the Carnegie II prophesy was: “Want Research Heaven: Obtain a ordained number of federal research dollars”, an academic version of chanting of the ordained number of Hail Mary’s. I wonder if the framers of the constitution, especially Thomas Jefferson, had anticipated that federal dollars would one-day result in a self-imposed control of intellectual freedom among academics of state university campuses.

In this movie, the Chocolateer and daughter, “blew in’ with the cold north wind. Next time the cold Canadian wind blows down the plains, and I shiver both in body and pocketbook, I shall think of Chocolat and hope, like in the movie, that these winds bring to us more than the mere enrichment of gas companies and commanders of cliché. Since I saw the movie about 2 weeks ago, Chocolat has been nominated for several Oscars and the President of the University of California System wants to drop the SAT ritual for college admissions. There is hope for all faiths.

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