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Doodling

Richard Burdick, Syracuse University

It all started with my doodling habit. Sitting at meetings – department meetings, committee meetings, doctoral defenses, meetings with the Chancellor, meetings with the insurance guy, you name it – I doodle. Faces, mainly. Big long aquiline noses, thick as weeds eyebrows, creases galore, just for the fun of it. Sometimes muscled, Michelangelo arms and backs, rippling with little muscular bumps for which I have no anatomical backing.

The doodling grew out of my realization at the age of 16 that I would never be an artist. Before that I had entertained little fantasies that I would pursue drawing and painting, go live in Paris and make a living in Florence, or Montmartre, somewhere I could be surrounded by grit and flowers and pretty girls who wanted me to do their portraits. At 16 I realized that my gifts were limited, that I would have to really study hard to rise up off my plateau, and that in any case other things – like learning about the past, digging in old documents, telling stories about dead people – were maybe more in tune with my abilities. So I drafted into history, then anthropology, and became a professor. The dreams of Florence were relegated to the margins of lined yellow pads.

As a professor at Syracuse University for the past 15 years – seems like longer, or shorter, depending on the day – I have dedicated considerable time and effort to building bridges with the "community" – social change organizations rooted in the area to which I can send energetic students to do projects, such as gathering evidence to support the Labor-Religion Coalition's campaign for a Living Wage, or the



Spanish Action League's desire to understand why Latinos don't vote in national elections, or the Service Workers' Union's need to improve relations between the leadership and the rank and file. Every year, about a dozen students are sent into the "field."

Over the years, I have become involved, partly through these projects, partly through my own values, with the peace and justice groups of the area. For five years I was co-chair of the local chapter of Peace Action, and then I migrated to the more anarchist-leaning Syracuse Peace Council. I became more and more deeply involved with activism, with participating directly in each organization's efforts to educate, activate and organize local people to stand up and fight against the US government's war-making policies. All the while I placed students in projects – to help Peace Action with getting to know better local attitudes toward nuclear weapons; to help the Syracuse Peace Council evaluate how better to reach out and educate high school students about alternatives to military service. And so on. You get the idea.

And all the while, through thick and thin, through meeting after endless meeting, I doodled. In the yellow margins.

So there I was, January of 2006, the war in Iraq had already been going on for close to three years. Three long years, at about \$10 billion of

wasted federal money per month, money turned into blood by the brutal and imperial policy of occupation. I was on a committee of the Syracuse Peace Council, along with about a dozen others, that we had called "The Local Cost of the War Committee" (or LCW). Our challenge – to bring the war home. To make it real. To convince people who had not lost loved ones or seen them come home disfigured or with devastated hearts (and there are many in upstate New York) that the war was horribly wrong, AND that it was stealing from our daycares and roads and bridges and disability ramps and educational loans and after school programs. And so on.

But how to do this? How to catch people's attention and keep it long enough that we could get them to read a few lines about the local impact the war was having on their everyday lives?

We agreed that what we needed were sheets, nicely colored ones, with big, eye-catching cartoons on the front, and "facts" on the back. We would call them "truth sheets" (activists aren't shy). Rose, a ceramicist, loved the idea of having a cat in every cartoon, in a lower right-hand or left-hand corner. To set the mood. "We can have the cat say things the people won't," she said. Great idea, I thought. I was doodling away.

But we didn't know who the artist would be, who would create the cartoons. Jessica, another committee member, identified someone who had cartooned for the Peace Council before, and we all agreed she would contact her. By the next meeting, we learned that she had moved away. We sat, crestfallen. I was looking down at my yellow pad, right hand agitatedly filling up the margin, maybe more fallen than the others.

Rose was to my right, and she looked over at me tussling with a sweep of hair across my Florentine-nosed god. "Ha!" She said. Or something like that. Maybe she said "Aha!" Yes, that's more like it. I think she said "Aha!"



"A star is born! John can be our cartoonist! John, I didn't know you drew!"

"I don't."

"But you sure do, what do you call all THAT?"

"I don't. Except when pushed. When pushed, I call it doodling."

Jessica wandered over.

"How about doodling for the Peace Council?"

I must say, strange as this may sound, my vanity really was touched. I guess it doesn't take much. I repressed a thought of Montmartre.

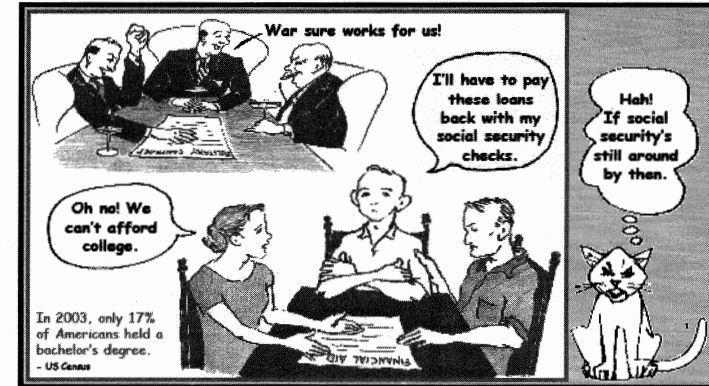
"Sure," I said. "Anything for the cause."

But, I added, "I insist that if a real artist comes our way I be relieved of duty."

That is how my six-month career as the official cartoonist for the Local Cost of the War committee began.

What followed turned into a string of experiences which remain, for me, among the most rewarding creative ones of my life. It is a little embarrassing to admit this. I certainly don't think my colleagues on the LCW committee dreamed that I valued this little job as much as I did. I would imagine that if anyone had asked, they would have insisted – working with all the little signs I had given them – that the job was something of an imposition, that I was doing it out of good comradeship, or something like that. Not so. I did it because I thrive on the creative and collaborative process. Really. Let me try to describe it.

The third or fourth "truth sheet" was to be about the crunch of higher education, the fact that the federal government was at that time



threatening to raise interest rates on student loans for college. The LCW saw this as unconscionable – here, the US was spending hand over fist to kill Iraqis but couldn't muster the few extra billion needed to keep student loans affordable. WE all saw what the issue was, but how to make the connection visually? How to create a cartoon that would drive home the injustice of the interest rate hike – admittedly, not the sexiest headline – and connect it to the war in Iraq? Not easy. That evening, as the six or seven of us on the committee sat at the big, rickety wood table in the main meeting room at the Syracuse Peace Council, at the time a clattering old house on Burnet Avenue, munched on popcorn, drank iced tea, and talked and debated and kibitzed. The idea was that if we talked for long enough, throwing around ideas about what the issue was, what features of it might lend themselves to a visual representation, I would eventually get an idea, mock it up in an extremely basic way on my trusty doodle pad (now promoted to "canvas"), and then we'd work together to refine the idea.

Person A: "I think we need a kid pulling his pockets inside out, with a cloud over his head, you know, one of those bubbles, and inside the bubble there's Harvard or something, and his dream has been crushed."

Person B: "No, you can't do that, because Harvard cost too much now, anyway."



Person C: "It doesn't have to be Harvard, could be any school."

Person A: "Right, I don't have any attachment to Harvard."

Person C: "But we don't want to show just that education is expensive, everyone knows that."

Person D: "Right. It'd not that it's expensive, it's that the kid can't afford it because of all the money being thrown at Iraq."

Person A: "So let's make it a state school."

Person D: "It's not the school itself that matters, it's connecting the fact that the student can't go, to the war in Iraq. How do we do that?"

Silence. I am sketching.

Person B: "Maybe this one calls for two panels. It's a complicated idea to convey in just one."

Person E: "No, we need to keep it to one panel; if we do two we'll lose people."

Person A: "I disagree. I think people are perfectly able and willing to read through two panels."

We would go around like this for a good hour before finally coming up, collaboratively, with an idea for a cartoon. Sometimes we used a big white board. But in general it was like this, me sketching as people talked. In this case, I liked the idea of having two key images, juxtaposed in some way – not exactly two panels, which I too thought might be asking too much.

"Hey, maybe what we need is some kind of parallel – the kid can't get his money to go to Podunk U, but fat cats are getting fatter."

"Fat cats. Right."



"Two documents, right? The application form for financial aid on one side and the military contract on the other."

That was it. That was the key connection that would make the whole image work. So I was then given my marching orders. I would have something like two or three days to come up with a cartoon, which I would then scan and send as a PDF to Jessica and Rose, who would then play around with captions. Meanwhile, a subcommittee was working on gathering the requisite facts for the fact sheet.

For some reason I worked best on the cartoons at night, in the deep middle of the night. I mean deep – like 2:00 a.m. After my lectures for class had been written. I would take out a short stack of 8 x 11 sheets of printer paper and a few pencils. It usually took me a couple of hours to get a final drawing. As I drew, I could feel my rudimentary skill in all its rudimentariness, yet I felt it was needed. The drawing for the student loan cartoon was especially complicated, and especially rewarding. The lower drawing, of the family at the table, would be like the Joads from *The Grapes of Wrath*. I thought about putting overalls on the father, but that would have been too much. How to make the kid look young? Put big ears on him, I thought. Ah, the creative juices were flowing, big ears and all.

Well, when I finally sent the scanned image to Jess at 4:00 a.m., I was exhausted and collapsed into bed for a couple hours' sleep. By 9:00, after my coffee, my eyes still swollen from insufficient sleep, I got the e-mail message from Jess. They loved it. They'd have the captions ready by later in the day.

I poured a second cup of coffee and read the paper. On the op-ed page of the local *Post Standard* there were the usual political cartoons. Today I scanned them with a knowing, fraternal eye.