

OPINION

THE LEDGER INDEPENDENT

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Red pens did me good

My second-grade teacher, Sister Mary, would be shocked that I turned out to be a writer. Please allow me to explain.

In recent years, many schools within the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia have barred teachers from marking student papers in red.

Their thinking is that correcting young students with red pens is too confrontational and upsetting for the children. Many teachers prefer to grade in more soothing colors, such as green, blue, pink and yellow.

Red ink surely wasn't banned at St. Germaine Catholic School in the '70s. That school was all business, and the wonderful sisters who taught there were too busy ramming knowledge and values into us to worry about our sensitive little egos.

It's true that the sisters were more favorable toward the more engaged students. Who could blame them?

We had 40 kids or more packed into each class. The sisters, many of whom entered the convent during the Depression and were getting on in years by the 1970s, were exhausted. They had little patience with daydreaming runts like me.

Whereas the better students were always attentive and eager, I was always staring out the window, thinking about the hills I would ride with my Murray five-speed — or plans I had to put an addition on the never-finished shack my buddies and I built in the woods.

I was a continual disappointment to Sister Mary (we called her Sister Mary Brass Knuckles) and, boy, did she let me have it. When she called me out of my daydreaming world to approach the chalkboard and complete an equation, it was humiliating.

"Are you lost in left field without a glove, Tommy?" she would say.

"Sister," I'd say, "I don't even have tickets to the game!"

Sister never let me or anyone off easy — and certainly didn't worry about our feelings.

She knew the only way to improve our self-esteem, ultimately, was to teach us how to be accurate and correct.

She marked up my English compositions as though she were being funded by the red-ink lobby.

She was ahead of her time. The educational emphasis on self-esteem and emotional comfort over the past 30 years is producing dismal results.

The latest Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results (2022) show that the math scores of U.S. 15-year-olds are well below those of other developed nations.

PISA concluded that "America's infatuation with the 'happiness factor' in education may be misplaced, and could, in fact, be hurting, not helping, American students when it comes to maintaining an international competitive edge."

In other words, America has some of the most smug, self-assured students on the face of the Earth.

Since they were babies, caring adults and educators assured them they are intelligent, attractive and wonderful — everybody gets a trophy — even though nobody asked them to break a sweat earning their wonderfulness.

So it turns out the proponents of the anti-red-ink mindset have it wrong. The good sisters at St. Germaine had it right.

All those red marks on my second-grade composition papers were unpleasant at the time, but they did me good in the long run.

As I said, Sister Mary Brass Knuckles would be proud to learn that this daydreaming pupil eventually applied himself and has been writing a nationally syndicated newspaper column for 20 years.



TOM PURCELL



Are you excited about the U.S. time capsule?

Certainly, I look forward to becoming reacquainted with all the groovy hairstyles, dated slang and kitschy doodads in a couple of years when my high school classmates open our 50-year time capsule. But I suspect most patriotic citizens are currently more focused on America's Time Capsule.

That's the one commemorating the United States Semiquincentennial. It's a 3-foot-by-2-foot stainless steel cylindrical vessel ("3-foot-by-2-foot? My kid has a Stanley tumbler bigger than that!") to be buried in Philadelphia's Independence National Historic Park on July 4, 2026 and to be ceremoniously opened on July 4, 2276 (the nation's 500th birthday).

I'm heartened that planners have enough optimism to believe that the nation will still stand in 250 years (after an "existential crisis" every 15 minutes). I'm heartened that we think the national motto will

be in the soul-stirring spirit of "E pluribus unum" rather than the dystopian "Inde est quod res gratas habere non possumus" ("This is why we can't have nice things").

Our country was birthed in the violence of the Revolutionary War, and there will doubtless be hyper-competitive brouhahas on the TV panel shows between now and July 4. ("I am an EXPERT on how people in 2276 will react to the time capsule." "Hmph! I am an AUTHORITY on how people in 2276 will react to the time capsule." "Bah! I am in touch with sources CLOSE TO THE SITUATION of how people in 2276 will react to the time capsule. Let's rumble!")

I know your imagination runs wild as you brainstorm things that would best represent your state or territory, but the America250 Commission has been a stickler about items that are too

bulky, too prone to corrosion or too likely to interact poorly with other artifacts.

This is to avoid what has been dubbed "the WKRP effect." America would be the laughing-stock of the world if we had a rogue governor lamenting, "As God is my witness, I thought tur-

keys could survive a quarter-millennium inside a stainless-steel cylindrical vessel!"

The container and its contents could conceivably remain intact for 250 years (if we resist the initial pushback from the "Are you sure that COMPOSTING flags, medals and student essays isn't a better plan?" busybodies, but things could go sideways in as little as 15 or 20 years. ("Season 37 of 'Storage Wars' needs something really special to boost the ratings. Hey, what if the National Park Service has missed some rent payments??")

Even if the writ-

ten documents remain in pristine condition, cultural and technological changes could take a toll. After 250 years, will anyone even be able to interpret them? ("What is this 'Times New Roman' font? Summon the Chief Scientist and the High Priest of Entrails Reading! Both on vacation? It's re-gifting time then!")

We Americans owe a great debt to our forebears who built this great nation. I'm less sure what we owe to the people of 2276, so the mischievous side of me thinks maybe we could yank their chain a little.

("Here are the cremated remains of a time traveler who came back to tell us of your progress. We salute you for resolutely surviving the Zombie Apocalypse of 2275. No, wait — that was the Zombie Apocalypse of 2277! My bad. Um, you have not yet begun to fight. Be brave. The Class of 1978 is re-burying polyester leisure suits for the cause...")



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