



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“Heroes and Role Models: Lazarus Zamenhof and Catherine Baldwin”

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What is a hero? And is someone born a hero, or does he or she become one? A hero has to have good ideals, but also has to put in an effort. A dreamer who sits at home thinking that the world should be better is not a hero because he or she makes no effort. A hero doesn't necessarily have to succeed, but he or she has to try.

Ludovic Lazarus Zamenhof was born in Bialystok, in Russian Poland in 1859. His parents were Jewish, although his mother was much more religious than his father. She believed that all people were equals, God's children. Lazarus, however, saw things on the street that seemed to counteract his mother's idealist theory. This was hard for the young boy. He noticed perhaps the most obvious difference between the often hostile groups: language. In Bialystok at that time there were speakers of German, Russian, Polish, Yiddish, and Lithuanian. Language separated these different groups. And so he began on his first, most famous, and most influential project: a universal language. It was a long struggle.

At one point his father, Marcus Zamenhof, afraid that his son would be suspected of treason by the xenophobic Czar, burned all of his son's grammars and vocabularies of the new language. There was also the problem of censoring. In Czarist Russia, one couldn't simply publish a book. If it was believed by the censors to be anti-Czar in any way, it could not be published. This was a problem, because Lazarus Zamenhof was an idealist, and his book was in favor of racial brotherhood. However, through his father's connections he managed to publish the book in 1887 under the pseudonym “Doktoro Esperanto” (or Dr. Hopeful).

Although he intended at first for the language to be called “Lingvo Internacia” or “International Language” it was his pseudonym, “Esperanto”, which was eventually adopted as the name of his language.

Esperanto is a combination of several languages, created in an attempt to be easily learnable to anyone from Europe and the Russian empire, and of course to any colony or former colony of a European country. In other words, Esperanto is easy to learn for speakers of Slavic, Germanic, and Romance languages. He used very simplified Latin grammar, and roots from Latin and German, along with a healthy dose of Spanish, some basic Russian, English words where all other roots already had different meanings, and a dose of Yiddish where no other language would do (Nu for well). A good example of Esperanto is the sentence “Saluton! Ĉu vi volas manĝaĵon?” A direct translation would be “Hi! Question you want eat-thing?” or “Hi! Do you want food?” In order to make it understandable to everyone, Dr. Zamenhof left word order almost completely arbitrary, so that people whose languages have very different syntax could write the language in the most natural way and still be understood.

Esperanto was a very important movement in the early 20th century, growing to a size of 2000 members. However, the movement has not significantly grown since 1910, due to government distrust during WWI, persecution of Esperantists in Nazi Germany, and FBI suspicions of Communism during the McCarthy era. All of these were because of pacifism and also because Esperantists were and are against nationalism. But there are still Esperantist societies in most countries of the world.

Later in life he began to work on his second project, far ahead of his time: an international religion. His religion was based mainly on the teachings of Rabbi Hillel, who lived from 30 BCE – CE 10. Hillel's writings include "If I am not for myself, who will be for me, if I am only for myself, what am I, and if not now, when?" These teachings were originally called "Hillelism." Dr. Zamenhof wrote that Hillelists should be guided by the following words:

"I am human, and the only ideals that exist for me are purely human; I regard all racial-national ideals as mere group egotism and human hatred.

"I believe that all peoples are equal. I regard as barbarity every offence or persecution of a human being merely because he was born of another race, with a language or religion different from my own.

"I believe that every country belongs not to this or that race, but with fully equal rights to all the people living in it.

"I regard as barbarity every attempt by one man to force his language or religion upon other men."

Dr. Zamenhof then changed the name of his religion to "Homaranismo" or Humanism, roughly translated. However, this was not City Congregation style Humanism, as it is not necessarily secular. To Humanistic Jews the word Humanism refers to the power of humans rather than to the power of gods, but to Dr. Zamenhof, who, along with most of his followers, believed in God, the word referred not to a belief in the exclusive power of humanity but rather to the idea that this "religion" was for all of humanity. Judaism is for Jews, and Christianity is for Christians, so Humanism is for humans. Dr. Zamenhof even encouraged that people believe in *something*, to satisfy the human need for such beliefs. We satisfy such beliefs at The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism by "believing" in the power of humanity.

Dr. Zamenhof was in Germany when WWI broke out. Upon hearing the news, it has been said that he was truly heartbroken, having given his life to achieving, or trying to achieve, world peace. He died a few years later in 1917.

But a hero is not what we want ourselves to be. A hero is someone we look up to: I have never really expected to work myself to death for a failing cause. So now let's look at someone amazing, but perhaps someone I hope more to emulate: my role model, Catharine Baldwin.

Catharine Baldwin is my 6th grade history and science teacher, and my director, who I am honored to say is here today. Could you please stand up?

Catharine Baldwin has directed numerous plays that I have been in, including, most recently, *The Doctor in Spite of Himself* and *The Grouch*. In *The Love of Three Oranges* she taught me how to play a villain, Leandro, in a comedy without overplaying the jokes. At first I played the part too nicely, and I was so conscious of the jokes that they weren't funny for the audience. She taught me that if I was serious about the funny parts, it would help the audience focus on the joke itself. That is important.

She grew up in Texas and was always confused about goals because she wasn't really expected to have any. She never "started" acting. She says she always did make-believe when she was little. She told me that she and her friends used to pretend they were the Beatles. She was always George Harrison. Her first performance was *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. She played Pigpen.

In high school she did a summer stock theater program. They performed 7 plays in 7 weeks. The director, Tony Vincent, had a strong influence on her personality and career.

In college in Vermont she took the "speed course" in Russian, finishing in 3 years. It was her first time living out of Texas. In her own words, it was as far as she could get.

After that she moved to New York. She says she built a few theater companies but found that she didn't like professional show business. Her choice was instead to work with children. She explained that directing is the "natural position" of an adult in a children's theater group. She found the switch from acting to directing easy because as an actor she picked up a lot.

In 1989 she started working at The Hudson School (she told me that she "kind of fell into teaching by accident") and met Suellen Newman, the director of the then-very-young institution, who taught her how to develop a community. She still teaches there, and when asked if and when she would retire, she said "I don't see why. I might do a little less if I get tired and start forgetting things."

She loves theater because it is, in all senses of the word, a team effort. "We're all in this mission together." Of her goals for her students she said "I want to turn them onto their own creativity"

Asked about her personal values she said "I value love. I think in the end it's the thing that really matters." And "I value history. I do. I think the stories we tell about our people are full of the meaning that we make out of what's happened to us. It helps us make meaning out of our lives. So I value storytelling and history."

But why exactly is Ms. Baldwin my role model? Can't any really good teacher be a role model? Well, no, a role model is more than that. So what exactly is it about Ms. Baldwin that makes her my role model? It's probably because she has taught me much more about what kind of person I want to be. She has inspired me to be the most open-minded and funny person I can be.

Ms. Baldwin once said that she wanted to transform audiences, but found that easier to do when teaching. And she definitely does transform her students. I can't speak for my classmates, but she instilled in me a love of history, science, and theater, the three things she taught me. In the same way, Dr. Zamenhof tried to transform the world.

These, for me, are champions of the process of communication: Dr. Zamenhof, whose language made a small difference in communication everywhere, and Catharine Baldwin, who has made a huge difference in a small school of about 200 students. They both, in their own ways, and in their own domains, have used communication to enrich the lives of others beyond belief. And that is heroic.