Lighting the way

By Glenn C. Altschuler

On a Saturday morning in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in January 1995, David Howell, a 24-year-old man with a history of violent behavior, called Earl Shorris. Howell told Shorris that he had had a dispute with a co-worker that made him want to push her against a wall and smack her around. “What happened?” Shorris asked, fearing the worst. “I asked myself,” Howell replied, “What would Socrates do?”

Howell was a student in the first class offered by the Clemente Course in the Humanities. Founded by Shorris, a writer, critic and social activist, the Clemente Course (named for baseball star and philanthropist Roberto Clemente) is dedicated to the proposition that immersion, via the Socratic method, in classical works of moral philosophy, art, history, literature and logic provides a pathway for poor people to become political, not only by voting in elections, but by learning how to reflect, negotiate, get along and acquire power instead of simply reacting — or using violence — against the numerous forces (hunger, isolation, sickness, abuse, addiction, unemployment, predators, police and racism) arrayed against them.

Since 1995, Clemente has reached tens of thousands of working people, college dropouts, immigrants and former convicts throughout the United States and in Africa, Australia, Asia and South America. In 2011, the Clemente Course was offered to high school students on the South Side of Chicago. In “The Art of Freedom,” a companion volume to “Riches for the Poor,” in which he addressed educational theory, Shorris (who died as his new book went to press), salutes Clemente’s administrators, teachers and, most of all, its students, whose journeys from “the edge of hopelessness, to the beauty and clarity of reflective thinking,” he writes, “are proof that poverty is not a necessary condition of human life.”

For many adults between the ages of 18 and 35, Shorris indicates, Clemente has served as a bridge to college. A mixed-race individual, Felicia Allyn was raised in Seattle by her mother’s white-supremacist family; dropped out of Boise State, hooked up with a drug dealer, got shot during a gang melee, moved to Charlotte with her sister, became addicted to crack, went to jail and returned to cocaine when she was released, before being scared straight by a judge.

When her rehab counselor recommended Clemente, Felicia was ready. She got into “The Art of Freedom,” received a B in the course, earned an associate’s degree from Trident Technical College and is now enrolled in the College of Charleston and employed by the local ABC News affiliate.

Stories like Felicia’s are, of course, inspiring. As is Shorris, a dedicated and demanding visionary who could never be accused of dithering. Many of us, I suspect, are inclined to share his view that the humanities can provide skills and values helpful to poor people.

In that spirit, however, it seems appropriate to probe a bit about the impact of the Clemente Course. Shorris was skeptical — perhaps rightly so — about relying too much on quantitative measures of outcomes. Although he boasts that 16 of the 30 students admitted to the first Clemente Course in 1995 completed it (14 of them receiving academic credit from Bard College), enhanced their self-esteem, problem-solving abilities and appreciation of benevolence, spirituality and collectivism, he acknowledges that Clemente depends on brilliant teachers and highly motivated, self-selected students.

Students who are “too poor,” Shorris suggests, have neither the time nor the energy “to be anything but poor.” Most of the time, he did not admit them to Clemente. When he did, they did not do the work, stopped showing up or dropped out.

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A Mexican American mother of three, who was repeating the cycle of poverty (teenage pregnancy, drugs and violence), Rita Falcon believes she would have made it without Clemente because she had already begun “to work, to strive to achieve.” Perhaps surprisingly, Shorris seems interested mostly in people like her, who got on the “right path” before they enrolled.

Shorris’s faith in the transformative power of the humanities, moreover, seems excessive. Using the Socratic method “in a gentle way” to teach the humanities, does not, necessarily, foster the art of freedom. After all, as Shorris knew, Plato was no democrat, the Founding Fathers owned slaves, and philosopher Martin Heidegger sympathized with the Nazis. Nor is it all clear that “the humanities are self-correcting.”

Working within and around these constraints, however, Shorris demonstrated, in 17 short years, that well-designed and well-taught courses can “pierce the structure of the surround of force” that holds poor people down. Many changes must be made before the culture of the streets becomes a culture of learning. But Earl Shorris has earned the right to rest in peace.

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