

PARADOXES, PARADIGMS, AND PURPOSE

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“Daddy, I know what color you are. You’re lemon-yellow-brown.”

Malcolm L. Butler

Vexation

The aforementioned gem came from my nine-year old son. This is one of the many unique perspectives on life he has shared with us during his relatively short time on Earth. This one came during church service on a Sunday morning when he was about six years old. Though I had never thought about my color other than the traditional “Black” that is associated with people like me in the US, his unique combination of hues led me to ruminate further about my “color”. This line of thought can also be related to my experiences as an undergraduate physics major and our study of the electromagnetic spectrum and the color spectrum, where colors are very important. So, my vexation revolves (or is it rotates?) around the triumvirate of paradoxes (lemons), paradigms (yellows) and purpose (brown) of life. How we handle these three issues as science teacher educators and science education researchers can have profound impact on our lives and the lives of those within our sphere of influence. It is along this vein that I situate my vexation, recognizing that my context is fluid, much like the title of this paper.

I must admit that the just dealing any one of the three issues – paradoxes, paradigms or purpose – can lead to mentally frustrating situations. But it’s difficult to compartmentalize a life we live everyday, as we shift roles, venues and thoughts during our waking hours. Nevertheless, as an academic, I am constantly reminded of the other roles I must fill in life, and I must fill them well, for others are depending on me to do so. When I have a class to teach *and* a gifted student-led conference to attend simultaneously, who should be given priority? Maybe I flip a coin, but that makes life a bit too simple for a person known to spend inordinate amounts of time in his head. There is no easy resolution, and the paradoxes don’t get any simpler.

The paradigms are similar in scope to the paradoxes. That’s why the two have the comparable colors of Lemon and Yellow from my son’s observational statement. However, academics tend to make a big deal out of paradigms, with most seeking to play some role in making “paradigm shifts” in the research conduct and/or the teaching they perform. My personal “situation recognition” battle is whether or not it’s so critical to shift paradigms, or is it just as important to disprove current paradigms or ways of thinking and doing our work?

Lastly, the purpose seems to be convoluted into the muddy waters of daily schedule. As the Mississippi River is murky, it is also considered Brown in color. The purpose is also singular in nature (compared to the aforementioned paradoxes and paradigms). Time is spent professionally to be a good citizen, get tenured and promoted, and then “you can really do the things” you want. So, does that mean I wait to pursue my purpose? Although we can press the pause button on an ipod or digital recorder, I have yet to find a way to press pause on life.

Venture

Dealing with the Paradoxes

My attempts to deal with the paradoxes have been instructive, with numerous lessons learned along the way. I constantly remind myself that as a human being, I am composed of many thoughts, and being an academic lays another layer of complexity. I am resigned to the “fact” that inherent in the complexity are paradoxes. The goal then becomes to devise strategies that will help me to successfully live with, if not resolve, these paradoxes. Maybe knowing that both ying and yang are complicit in life’s activities is enough.

Understanding the Paradigms

I am starting to be quite content (not satisfied) with the possibility that I may not contribute in any large way to paradigms or paradigm shifts in science education research or science teaching. After all, for every Thomas Edison, there was a Lewis Latimer. . .



Lewis H. Latimer

(<http://www.lrc.rpi.edu/resources/news/pressReleases/img/Lewis.jpg>)

Lewis Latimer was born in the mid-19th century in Massachusetts, the youngest child of formerly enslaved parents. His impeccable work as a draftsman and inventor led him to be invited and recognized as one of the 28 original “Edison Pioneers”. This group of men included some of the key individuals in the development of the electric light industry. Of course, Mr. Latimer had many hurdles to overcome in his attempts to be recognized for his work. One of which was the limited context of his contributions and inventions.

In American society, a society obsessed with every minute detail of its historical past, it is strange and unfortunate that popular and scholarly American history disregards the ways black people produce, shape and affect technological change. (Fouché, 2003, p. 2)

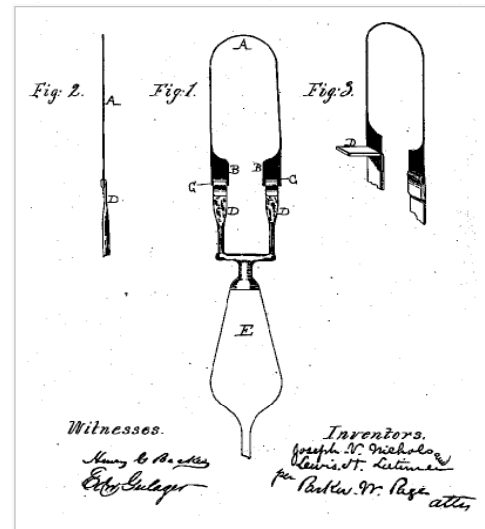
Yet, Mr. Latimer had a lucid sense of his purpose in life and strategies for achieving it.

Seeking my Purpose

Probably most important for me is how to go about what I perceive as my purpose. The professional and the personal go alongside each other in my life. So, Mr. Latimer’s example may be an appropriate one for me to consider emulating. I can also include one of my mother’s favorite adages, “Do what you can, while you can, where you can,” which lends itself quite nicely as to how to go about achieving my purpose. In the next few academic years, I will be serving my colleagues, college, university and the science education profession in several key roles. In these roles, I can focus on fulfilling these roles, and if some significant changes happen, even better. In this case, maybe a myopic view will serve me well. Mr. Latimer did not seek to do totally radical things; rather, he focused on making things better by attempting to solve some of the problems of his time. In the end, he was respected by his peers for his work and appreciated for who he was as a person. If only I can be so fortunate.

P.S. I made it to the gifted student-led conference!

J. V. NICHOLS & L. H. LATIMER.
ELECTRIC LAMP.
No. 247,097. Patented Sept. 13, 1881.



(Source: Fouché, 2003.)