Kwanzaa Summary & Reflections

This is a summary of the seven nights of Kwanzaa, based on my three publications and four presentations. Local economic development projects receive praise, and various philosophies/religions are given attention. This article has links to flickr photos too.

Kwanzaa Summary and Reflections, by J.D. Meyer

Kwanzaa is a seven-night pan-African holiday (December 26th--January 1st) celebrating the virtues: (1) unity, (2) self-determination, (3) collective work & responsibility, (4) cooperative economics, (5) purpose, (6) creativity, and (7) faith. Founded in 1965 after the Watts Riots by Dr. Maulana Karenga of California State at Long Beach, the holiday has faced criticism for supposedly being anti-Christian, the sordid past of the founder's early life, and inclinations toward Black separatism. However, the festival is supposed to be cultural, not religious--a celebration of the first harvest. The seven virtues are universally accepted. Moreover, Kwanzaa purism doesn't hold up in application from what I've seen as a participant--particulary the ease in having a prominent Christian minister speak at Faith night at the end for an overwhelmingly Christian audience.Whether or not Dr.Karenga was ever Marxist seems irrelevant with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of capitalism despite frequent totalitarianism in Communist, or once Communist countries. It seems highly unlikely to hear any calls for Marxism/Communism anymore. My penchant for celebrating long-range city planning may disturb Kwanzaa purists for not being "Black enough;" neither am I.

Frankly it's easy to focus on Kwanzaa and miss hearing about the a lot of the controversy surrounding Dr. Karenga, as I found in the writing of this summary article. I delivered Kwanzaa addresses in 2002, 2003, 2008, and 2009. I wrote for the other three nights. Creativity is the only principle that has been a presentation and article for me. Faith is the only principle that was neither publication nor article, simply an extra chapter section in the old format. Finally, there has already been one overall Kwanzaa talk in early 2012. I wanted to have a summary/reflections article that condensed this data. Some details were appropriate for the year but fleeting in importance as one looks back several years later. Plus, I didn't want Kwanzaa to overwhelm the African-American Studies chapter of my Developmental English/Writing textbook.

Furthermore, we had the angry denouncement of the Wisconsin state senator--Glenn Grothmann (R)--curiously at Kwanzaa's end on New Year's Day 2013. Kwanzaa was labeled anti-Christian, and Dr. Karenga's criminal past was brought up in detail. Strangely, Grothmann declared Kwanzaa to be a tool of left-wing White liberals while African-Americans allegedly don't care about it anymore.http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/01/glenn-grothman\_n\_2392816.html Ironically, an article from The Root in late 2011 entitled, "Who Celebrates Kwanzaa" www.theroot.com/views/who-celebrates-kwanzaa-holiday-statistics found that African-American baby boomers born between 1946-1964 are the most likely to celebrate Kwanzaa. Older and younger people of any race are less likely. Although Kwanzaa was more popular a while back, it's in no danger of extinction. Perhaps the night-time programming for Kwanzaa discourages older people because of the cold weather and/or desire not to drive at night. As for Dr. Karenga, recall the ad hominem logical fallacy: dismissing the product because of who made it: moreover, he hasn't been in trouble since the Seventies.

When delivering a Kwanzaa principle talk or writing an article about it, it's good to begin with an amplification of the principle's meaning, as found on a website such as http://www.officialkwanzaasite.com written by Dr. Karenga. The elaboration should endeavor to fit the speaker's audience and his/her background. I hope this summary of Kwanzaa does no less than contribute to a comeback for the 7-day holiday and make it more accessible to those outside the usual crowd. Probably the seasonal nature of Kwanzaa imposes a narrow time window of opportunity for its discussion; in other words, many folks may tell you to hush if you try to talk about Kwanzaa if it isn't December--even if it's February, Black History month.

Principle #1: Unity http://voices.yahoo.com/can-technology-education-cool-7522022.html?cat=4

Unity is described by the founder as inviting an "alternative sense of solidarity...the world's health and wholeness require education to know about others." My reaction was to ask if technology could make education cool, even history. Internet use today is common extends to all ages, but the article's purpose was to encourage more a positive approach toward education through Internet use rather than using the Internet chiefly for shallow socializing and gossip. The U.S. decline in education is well-documented, particulary among African-Americans. Moreover, history seems to be getting kicked out of the top four academic subjects in favor of the STEM emphasis: science, technology, engineering, and math. A self-directed student could find tales from history that could easily be censored until the junior year of college by a conservative school administration.

My article rattled off a lengthy list of my education research interests and why they are cool. Yet at the same time, I expressed concern that such discussion could be seen as too much self-promoting. Nevertheless, enjoying a wide range of Spanish music genres is a fun way to learn the language, and I wrote an article on Spanish-language music that traveled from its start at LessonPlanPage.com to the University of British Columbia through Creative Commons copyright sharing. Studying Psychological Type Theory is a great vehicle to self-knowledge and improved mental health. I'm an ENFP--a common profile for an English teacher or journalist. I published an article in which I called for the mass popularization of Psychological Type Theory in the aftermath of the Tucson mass shooting that critically injured Congresswoman Gabby Giffords http://tinyurl.com/3r9phfe. Flickr is the photo-sharing branch of yahoo that allows one to illustrate their writings. How we teach knowledge of others can face opposition. Finding the sustainability principles of composition by Derek Owens was great for me. It empowers me to defend my Developmental English textbook's model essays from critiques that they are too regional or idiosyncratic. Writing a textbook has been a long-term project since the mid-90's, growing from 47 to 400 pages over the years.

I noted education-related interests since entering middle age. The Rise of the Creative Class by Dr. Richard Florida, now of the University of Toronto, started my interest in urban studies. Dr. Florida's 3 T's--talent, technology, and tolerance--can be shown as reasons for urban growth; the fourth T, territorial assets was added recently. Teaching ESOL is another frequent area for me. Lately, I developed a method for teaching cognates based on the Spanish glossaries in Texas textbooks. Formal and technical English have their roots in French and Latin--members of the Romance language family along with Spanish. Ironically, informal English is descended from German, so cognate study helps make the tougher language easier. Yet any method that looks like bilingual education after fifth grade can face vehement political opposition.

Citizen journalism describes the modern potential for somebody to publish an article without being anewspaper or magazine employee. I started at Associated Content, now Voices.yahoo, as the e-journal was bought by the massive Internet corporation. It's possible to write for the hyperlocal audience in your neighborhood or the international scene. You can write about education in textbook or lesson plan style too.

To give a pep talk to the other writers at , Voices.yahoo I cited The Crisis in Criticism, edited by Marcus Berger, an anthology of wonderful essays about literary criticism. Six key qualities of critics are the following: (1) curiosity, (2) attentiveness, (3)concern, (4) vision, (5) art and language, and (6) the debate a critic makes available. Our response to the unknown evolves knowledge and makes transformation happen. On a cautionary note, I shared an addition to my Quotation Marks chapter section: How to quote a controversial figure. Put the statement within quotation marks then say something like, "a great thinker once said..." To close, I reminded the readers to pay attention to the flood of after-Christmas sales as the perfect time to buy books for your favorite children.

Principle #2: Self-Determination 2008

Self-determination began with ideas of "dignity-affirming" and "life-enhancing" as opposed to "imitation, (a) coercive conformity" Partly since I spoke at a church that night, I brought up the Parable of the Talents, noting that the servant who buried his few talents so he wouldn't lose them was severely chastised by his master when he returned from his trip. Jesus rarely if ever showed more anger in his teachings. That church was Pentecostal, so to thank them for letting us have our Kwanzaa celebration at their church, I urged the audience members to visit a Pentecostal church if they weren't already members and feel the energy. Moreover, I saluted the Pentecostal movement for reaching one billion members worldwide in roughly a century, as large as the Catholics--the original Christian denomination. Such Christian friendliness hardly fits the negative stereotype of Kwanzaa programmers.

Then I noted some excerpts from three Kwanzaa authors at Voices.Yahoo--including a children's Kwanzaa book author. Karama Neal asked her readers, "What do you want to accomplish today, this year, and in your lifetime? And make it happen!" Themes of self-control and planning radiated from the other two authors as well. Kwanzaa easily lends itself to easy to understand ethics for children.

Most of my adult life, I was a Unitarian-Universalist who presented over a dozen sermons in several years. Once I gave a talk called, "Applying the Kwanzaa Principle of Self-Determination to Unitarian-Universalism." Since UU'ism is a creedless religion, critics claim that its adherents don't have to believe in anything. So I urged the members to prepare themselves by working on their "elevator speeches"--such as service to society is our prayer. Self-determination in Kwanzaa asserts that the individual and the institution should define themselves and not be resigned to labels given by detractors.

Then I mentioned some key concepts from Neo-Confucianism--a topic in my interdisciplinary master's thesis; something about self-determination got me talking about three different religions! Neo-Confucianism teaches us that shame is the beginning of the virtue of righteousness (i), or appropriate-assertiveness. It takes courage for us to move beyond occasional bumbles or far worse--a doormat life-style. Moreover, a sincere will (ch'eng-yi) enables us to create new rules of propriety (li) to stay in the authentic spirit of the ancients who built the early society. That sounds like the birth of Kwanzaa. In 1988, modern New Confucian, Tu Wei-ming contributed to a Life magazine article called, "The Meaning of Life." pg. 93 in Life, Dec. 1988, Vol. 11, No. 14, 76-101. http://www.maryellenmark.com/text/magazines/life/905W-000-037.html Among other things, Dr. Tu noted that God is everywhere and probably all-knowing, but since humanity must perform action, God isn't all-powerful. God needs us to participate in the co-creation of the world--very similar to the process thought of Alfred North Whitehead. Quite a call for a work ethic, isn't it?

http://www.flickr.com/photos/soulofchristmascom/342794044

The Seven Principles of Kwanzaa with traditional candelabra: three red candles, a black candle in the center, and three red candles.

Principle #3: Collective Work & Responsibility http://www.galleryofwriting.org/writing/1708666

This article has the distinction of being published by the National Writing Project (NWP) in the section for The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Collective work and responsibility calls to "maintain and build our community together and make our brothers' and sisters' problems our own and solve them together," according to Dr. Karenga. We should build the good world we want and deserve. Leave a legacy worthy of our history and be concerned with our future and the world." These descriptions of Principle #3 reminded me of tikkun olam--repairing the world-- a Reform Jewish concept. I chose to examine Tyler 21, a city plan developed when the East Texas city reached 100,000 in population. http://www.cityoftyler.org/Departments/PlanningDepartment/ComprehensivePlan/Tyler21.aspx Tyler 21 invited outside consultants and community volunteers. Goody Clancy, a Boston urban planning group led by Mary Means, headed Tyler 21. Former mayor, Joey Seeber wanted maximum community participation while being on-guard for the repeat of inbred ideas.There were seven committees: Downtown Revitalization, Northside Restoration, Parks, Transportation, Historic Preservation, Public Facilities and Services, Housing and Neighborhoods, and Tyler 21 Consolidation. A year later, Tyler won four awards at the Texas Downtown Conference, including best public partner by the city of Tyler.

As a volunteer, I submitted an annotated link page on Northside Restoration since that is my neighborhood, and I taught Developmental English at the local HBCU for five years. North Tyler is 90% minority: 57% African-American and 32% Hispanic-American. Moreover, writing annotated link pages is one of my favorite hobbies, so I discussed the process itself. Realize when you're studying a new field that some of your findings are probably going to be beginner information. Yet that makes link pages so worthwhile because they can take you to more advanced levels.

Two of my focus areas were the vacant land problem and key statistics revealed through Claritas-PRIZM. When an area has over 15% of its land vacant, that's bad and North Tyler is 40% vacant. Some vacant land is necessary since the creeks, streams, and flood plains are required to deal with rain. Plus, it's a thin line between park and vacant land. Tyler prides itself on its natural beauty--the largest city in East Texas, an area rich in all kinds of trees. Claritas-PRIZM is zip code cluster marketing, and it reveals that you can learn a lot about a neighborhood by the products its residents buy, shows they watch, and cars they drive. It reveals wealth or poverty and looks at the average age of the residents too.The prestigious Nielsen Corporation has bought Claritas. Sadly, it reveals that Tyler has a significantly disproportionate number of young poor adults. I acknowledged a Tyler newspaper article about the need for factories, business tax breaks, and sewers along with the more futuristic mass appeal reading stuff, "Economic Development Tools: Efforts to Attract, Retain Becoming More Aggressive," by Greg Junek and Jacque Hilburn (Oct. 22, 2006).

Then my attention turned to the National Day on Writing, started by the National Conference of Teachers of English (NCTE) and endorsed by the U.S. Senate in Fall 2009. The NCTE began this celebration to accent the greater role in life that writing plays nowadays--often social media. This site serves a similar role to citizen journalism e-journals in that someone who doesn't work for a newspaper or journal can submit an article to a variety of galleries. The NCTE had their own gallery as did some school districts, high schools, and special interest groups. The NCTE published my article on Collective Work and Responsibility at their national gallery! Garland ISD and Austin ISD were two Texas public school districts that had galleries for their employees and students.

Principle #4: Cooperative Economics 2009

I began this talk with my reflection on the underlying principle of Kwanzaa: the effort to serve as a public intellectual. Actually this address was the night's second talk and based somewhat on the published article for Principle #3. Frankly, I'd become ill on night #3 yet returned the next night when the second speaker was a no-show! Summarizing Nights #3 and #4 have become the most challenging aspect of this article to prevent re-runs and redundancies. We looked at Tyler 21, one year later. I discussed the awards Tyler received from the Tyler Downtown Revitalization conference, as previously written for Night #3. During Tyler 21, I suggested that tree trimmers get a wood chipper, so they don't have to keep making runs out in the country to dump wood. Besides the wood chips could be sold by the bag to reduce storm drainage. Claritas PRIZM zip code cluster marketing tells us that a product like Build a Bear would sell well in South Tyler because of upper-middle class neighborhoods and both parents working. However, North Tyler has a large percentage of poor young people as shown by the Striving Singles cluster group--something I documented on my Northside Revitalization link page for Tyler 21.

The focus of Night #4 was the Intellectual Entrepreneurship program at University of Texas at Austin. Its goal is to bring intellectual power of the university to social problems--the opposite of the ivory tower. IE is a consortium of eight colleges and four schools at UT; it's not a major. IE programs include mentoring undergraduates, how to reduce emergency room visits, oral history, and art entrepreneurship. IE exists at other universities, including Arizona State. The program goes as far back as 1995 to the University of Warsaw.

I feel that IE would work well at UT-Tyler and answers the new Industry Growth Initiative (IGI) http://www.cityoftyler.org/Departments/Communications/IndustryGrowthInitiative.aspx Strategy 1 for Higher Education. Tyler's three colleges only generate $7500/student. Cities with major research universities can generate as much as $100,000/student. The following summer, I published an article on this proposal at a local e-journal, now called PineyWoodsLive (Formerly The Daily You) Then it was reprinted by the IE at UT website itself and the University of Toronto Creative Class/Education website http://www.creativeclass.com/rfcgdb/articles/Intellectual%20Entrepreneurship%20at%20The%20University%20of%20Texas.pdf IE has a wonderful mentorship program of undergraduates; inadvertently, it has helped desegregate graduate school and help first-generation college students of all races. Not a major, the IE consortium at the University of Texas has the participation of eight colleges and four schools: Communications, fine Arts, liberal Arts, Natural Science, Law, and Education, together with Engineering, Information Technology, Public Affairs, and Social Work. IE gets involved in practical adventures such as reducing emergency room visits, oral history, and arts entrepreneurship. Intellectual Entrepreneurship is present at other universities, such as Stanford, Michigan, and Arizona State. Actually, the concept began in Warsaw, Poland back in 1995.

http://ww.flickr.com/photos/brownpau/5212254521

Kwanzaa Starbucks Card: Now That's Cool

Principle 5: Purpose 2003

Purpose seeks to "develop our communal foundation to help children build greatness in communities, schools, and families." I found myself defending Kwanzaa that night. First I stressed that it's a cultural/historical festivity not religious. Moreover, we have a minister on Faith night at Kwanzaa's end. As for Kwanzaa being separatist, it's assumed our holidays are going to have a predominantly White orientation. I asked, "Must the direction of integration always be like Sammy Davis Jr in the Rat Pack or a relative handful of Black athletes at a major university?" I noted the irrelevance of Dr. Karenga possibly once having Marxist ties because the blunders of Communism are so well-documented nowadays that no fringe liberal would give them credence.

The last half of my talk was spent discussing a Kwanzaa-influenced website called the Nia (Swahili for "Purpose.") Community Board and my first website through McGraw-Hill Pageout. Unfortunately, Nia is now gone and Pageout was threatened in August 2012, so I downloaded onto two flashdrives. Building my Pageout site started with Spanish, so the Texas College students could have a tutor when their part-time prof at night wasn't around. Of course, a Developmental English instructor is going to have an English section. I already told you about my mid-life interest in Economic Development. Then I developed Ethnic Studies and African-American Studies. There were accounts of three high school outreach programs through NASA-PACE and/or Upward Bound. I have General Education, ESOL, and Higher Education. Greater differentiation is the rule. Annotated link pages is a great way to share research with others. I had some guest authors on my pageout website too.

Now my main website http://independent.academia.edu/JDMeyer is through the Academia.edu program, and it includes links to my Pageout sites, Twitter account, Flickr photo site, and HubPage site. Furthermore, one can post one of their scholarly articles at the main section and get publicity around the world. For example, my Subject-Verb Agreement module is the most popular of my featured articles, and it's become particularly popular in The Philippines. You receive notices from members of the Academia.edu family when they write another article in a field of your interest.

Toward the talk's end, I mentioned a prominent thinker who said he recoverd from racist attitudes when he realized that if you're really a friend of God, who can bully you? Keep your career goals and prepare to defend yourself from objections.

http://www.flickr.com/photos/msvg/5287196001

Wishes for a good Kwanzaa from Toronto--complete with puppy

Principle 6: Creativity 2002 & http://voices.yahoo.com/creativity-kuumba-6th-principle-1665703.html?cat=9

Creativity was my first presentation or article on Kwanzaa. The definition of creativity by Dr. Karenga is to leave the community more beautiful and helpful than when we found it. This description of creativity reminded of its applicability feature, according to gifted and talented research. The other three features of creativity are originality, fluency, and flexibility. Applicability may be the most important criteria for creativity. Can you put it into action?

The Creativity of Kwanzaa may be African-American in form, but it's universal in essence. Dr. Karenga used creativity to develop Kwanzaa in response to the tragic Black-on-Black property crime of the Watts Riots in 1965. My later revision mentioned the london Riots of 2011. Gentrification can lead to great tension when poor housing is remodeled into something only richer people can afford.

During Kwanzaa, there is something for all the senses: art to see, lectures to hear, and a potluck to eat on either the sixth or seventh day. The candelabra of Kwanzaa reminded me of Chanukah. One thinker stated that moving toward a more perfect union requires not bashing others. He encouraged his listeners to perform volunteer service. Consider joining a church or organization to rebuild the wasted cities. Be a pen pal for someone in jail. Possibly even adopt a child. Maybe you could contribute efforts to an economic development foundation. Hey, we did that later!

Kwanzaa can be a call for scholarship. An organization like ours can bring knowledge of Pan-African culture whether colleges do it or not. The Developmental Studies manual called for using an Afrocentric approach in presenting material whenever possible. At first I was a little shy about teaching a predominantly Black audience about their history. Then I realized I could be saving my students from embarrassment later in life. Some of my early findings were about Blacks in early Mexico, such as the West African roots of the Pre-Columbian Olmec in Vera Cruz together with the Afromestizos of Guerrero on the west coast. Then there were Jewish exiles who taught at Southern Black colleges during the Nazi era in Europe.

The Creativity of Kwanzaa can be a call for courage. Half a lifetime ago, I had a large and good but rather unique thesis, "Approaching Cognitive-Behavioral and Existential Therapy through Neo-Confucianism." So I shrank whenever anyone had criticism of it. I could look back and claim I was the victim of Eurocentrism, White supremacy, or fools who didn't realize they were insulting a traditional foe of Communism. Nowadays, my presentations of the Confucian tradition are assertive enough.

Creativity can be repairing the worn out. Later I would mention that the Moore Grocery Lofts of Tyler won an award for Best Adaptive Re-Use at the Texas Downtown Conference in 2009. In a general Kwanzaa talk during early 2012, I mentioned that Medicaid serves to repair worn out people too. My original Kwanzaa Creativity talk concluded with a quote from the process theologian/mathematician, Alfred North Whitehead, who emphasized that desire needs to have a form; otherwise, it's just formless yearning. http://www3.sympatico.ca/rlubbock/ANW.html

Principle 7: Faith, originally a chapter section only.

As written previously, Faith is the place for a minister to give the address, so I simply wrote an additional chapter section to round out a complete Kwanzaa package in the original format. Now I want a condensed Kwanzaa message to improve its accessibility.

Faith according to Afrocentric News means to place faith in our parents, teachers, leaders, and others as we strive for righteousness and its ultimate victory. The U.S. has been mired in battles between the President and Congress because of a desire by the latter for constant sabotage. It's reached the point where Fareed Zakaria of CNN surmised in 2011 that the British system is better because the prime minister is the head of the legislature also. Babbling fillibusters can't happen there either.

Kwanzaa can battle anti-intellectualism, even semi-illiteracy through exciting programming designed to improve cultural awareness. It's no secret that American educational achievement has been going downhill for years, especially African-American. There has been a weakening of the middle-class, leading to calls to unleash entrepreneurship, increase wages for the service occupations, and most recently--raise the minimum wage in general.

My Kwanzaa programs in Tyler often celebrated city planning efforts, whether Tyler 21, the Industry Growth Initiative (IGI), or winning awards at the Texas Downtown Conference. Perhaps that would be viewed as the biggest departure from traditional Kwanzaa planning or stereotypes for it hailed multiethnic collaboration and couldn't be viewed as leftist extremism. It even may be seen as a descendant of the late Jack Kemp's advocacy of urban renewal.

Proverbs 15:22 states, "Without counsel, plans go wrong; with many advisers, plans succeed." That sounds like the perfect prayer for a committee meeting. Consider the Confucian definition of faith as the completion of the other four virtues: humanity, righteousness, decorum, and wisdom. T'ang Chun-i urged us to have self-confidence in our sincerity, continuing the tradition of tzu-jan chi li or "spontaneity is conforming to principle." Yet, Michael Brensen in The Crisis of Criticism asserts that the intellectual should not consider anything off-limits "to the most rigorous analysis--even faith." Perhaps I would have declared faith to be the ultimate field of analysis and dialogue Keep your faith despite setbacks. Acknowledge your long-term projects and friendships; for me, that includes Kwanzaa.

http://www.flickr.com/photos/allaboutgeorge/4218085092

Kinara (Kwanzaa candelabra) in an Oakland YMCA Lobby--a wooden wine goblet in the foreground