

Episode 11

Not To Mention Disneyland Paris

Franciscan Jesuit Academy, a Dominican preparatory school located in El Paso, Texas, has been breeding Roman Catholic scholars for over a century. Originally an all-boy institution, it went co-ed in the 1950s, much to the dismay of then-principal Monsignor (“Terror”) del Fuego, a Benedictine monk who immediately retired to tend to the flock in the Tichilesti leper colony in Romania. “It will be a healthier atmosphere than this one, once the girls arrive,” was the way he put it as he headed off into the sunrise.

Contrary to Monsignor del Fuego’s expectations, the invasion of females did not bring ruin to the school. FJA had hitherto always been a small operation, with about a hundred or so students in each class, but the baby boom was in full explosion mode at the time, and more classrooms were needed all over the country; meanwhile, land in El Paso, not being exactly choice because, well, land in El Paso is actually *in* El Paso, was ripe for acquisition and building. Which meant that by the 1960s, FJA had four hundred students in each class year, all getting along together perfectly well despite being of more than its one original gender. The overall level of sin and vice was within the Catholic Church’s general guidelines,¹ which was all that could be expected.

Today Franciscan Jesuit is a bit smaller than in its heyday, with about 1200 students overall. It is still Catholic, and it performs well by all normal measures of graduates-to-college and the like. Its student body ranges from recent Mexican immigrants to old Texas families, making it a fairly diverse place, and its Catholic roots allow it to celebrate its diversity.

¹ It should be noted that we are unable to provide in detail what those guidelines are because they were originally on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum, the list of books banned by the Vatican. This list is no longer active except for a handful of especially juicy titles, like the one providing sin and vice guidelines. Only the Pope really knows what can or can’t be done in Catholic high schools, and he’s not talking.

The Luce triplets represent neither old Texas nor new Mexicans. Their family is originally from Italy, and the suspicion is that their original name was Luca, changed long ago on Ellis Island by an official with less than perfect hearing. Luca, Luce—it didn't matter much, as long as they were let into the country. A century later, there are Luca Luces all over the continent, including Anthony Luce and his wife Sandra, the parents of our three young Luces—Lou, Lu and Lulu. They are one boy and two girls, and the result of not much imagination on the name-game side of things (and also, one is pretty certain, the result of some under-the-table fertility drugs).

The Luce triplets, like most matched birth sets, were always a relatively closed unit. There were the three of them, and everybody else. At home, it was the three of them and their parents. At school, it was the three of them and the rest of the students, the three of them and the teachers, the three of them and the bus drivers and the cafeteria workers. The triplets were seldom apart except as their different sexes separated them into different gym classes. As they years passed they were in the school plays together, the school band together, the school glee club together, the school everything-they-did together. Including, at Franciscan Jesuit Academy, the debate team.

The FJA forensicians were the usual run of Public Forum teams and the one or two Lincoln Douglas types in every graduating year, the ones who didn't necessarily play well with others or who thought that PF was for second-raters who weren't up to the task laid out in LD, or both. To be honest, originally the triplets had been attracted to PF, but given that every PF team comprises two people, and the Luce triplets comprised three people, it wasn't a very good fit. Which two would be the main pair? Or would they rotate among themselves? Or pick randomly for every tournament? The idea that two of them might make one team, and that the leftover Luce might permanently join up with a non-Luce on another team, was never an option. They were the Luce triplets, not the Luce twins plus one. They just didn't do things that way.

So for them it was Lincoln Douglas, not so much by choice but by lack of a workable alternative. Yes, they've have to compete as individuals rather than as a triad, but they could live with that. Lou, Lu and Lulu, contrary to appearances, did at some core part of their brains recognize in themselves unique and solitary personages. And where others saw a threesome connected at the hips, they saw one another as the smart one, the good-looking one, the shy one, the funny one, the optimist, the pessimist—that is, as particular, special, fully functional human beings, discernible as persons.

Then again, they *were* joined at the hip in certain ways. They had been associated with one another for as long as they had drawn breath; for that matter, the association went back to the primal amniotic fluid. So on the one hand, they resented when people treated them as one person with three not-worth-distinguishing heads, yet on the other hand, as often as not they acted like that three-headed single person. Being one of a set of triplets just worked that way. You were, and you weren't. You learned to live with it, as did the people who had to deal with you, that is, you as you and you as one of the three. For each Luce as a Luce, as well as each Luce as a Luce triplet, that LD would be their debate specialty was obvious from the getgo. It was never questioned. What would be the point?

Franciscan Jesuit's debate coach is a social studies teacher named Tina Gusset. She is not a member of a religious order, which is not unusual at FJA, where about half of the staff are lay teachers. Tina Gusset is in her fourth year of teaching and had been, back in her own high school days, an avid LDer from The Petunia School. This meant that she was the first debate coach at FJA to understand and actively seek participation in circuit debate. For the Luce triplets, she was the perfect coach at the perfect time. She knew how to get them what they soon learned they wanted, and as a young woman very much interested in having a life outside of her job, she knew how to get out of their way. In fact, at most tournaments, they didn't see her from the moment they arrived to the moment they collected their trophies (which they always did). She was that kind of coach. And they were that kind of triplets.

Tonight, like every participant at the COC, the Luces are prepping for the big event. This is not their first year in Codswallop. They debuted last year, as juniors. Their goal then was to achieve winning records, which they did. They saved the goal of breaking into elims, and winning the whole salami, for this year. They have every intention of achieving that goal, and every belief that they will, because of their not-so-secret weapon: Crapaud Theory.

It was Lulu who first came up with the idea. The history of Lincoln Douglas debate is littered with fashions that one season were unbeatable, and the next season were unwinnable. For years, the original thrust of the activity was the use of Enlightenment philosophers, and for good reason. They wrote about the position of the individual vis-a-vis society, that is, all individuals. These philosophers presented ideas on ethics, and how to achieve justice and how to define morality. Some of them were the thinkers on which living ideas like the American government were based; to say that Thomas Jefferson was echoing John Locke in the Declaration of Independence is to mindlessly

spout the obvious from *Government Studies for Dummies*. The thing is, this material was perfect for high school students. Writers like Locke and Mill were accessible if you gave them half a chance, and their material was relevant to resolutions that were about rights and fairness.

But all good things come to an end. College students—former LDers—went to college and learned about the postmodernists and the structuralists and the 20th Century philosophers who were challenging the canon. Some of the pomos challenged the very idea of reality, or the idea that words could be used to express ideas, or that ideas even existed. Meditation on ontology was redirected to meditation on epistemology, and eventually even the ontological idea of epistemology was suspect. This was the sort of thinking—and we use that word advisedly—that had taken academe by storm a few decades earlier, but which was now losing most of its credence. But by virtue of its newness—to them—the college students who had been raised on high school Enlightenment were enthralled. None of them understood Nietzsche, the starter set down the road to ruin who, as a source of ethical guidance, was about as useful as a one-legged sloth, but that was beside the point. None of them understood Derrida either, the next stop on the journey who, as a source of even a single readable sentence, made a one-legged sloth look like a Triple Crown winner. And when they tired of these cornerstones of complexity and contradiction, they dug deeper and deeper, getting progressively more and more obscure, until finally it seemed that if anyone knew what was being talked about in an LD round, it was a miracle.

This is not to say that there weren't some useful thinkers in this pack of mostly duds. Michel Foucault, who was rumored to have specifically banned anyone who was not a professional philosopher from attempting to parse his works, had something to offer in the idea of power defining perceptions. And Jean Baudrillard wrote entertainingly about subjects like art and theme parks, so people could enjoy the thrust of his ideas, even if they were totally irrelevant to any given debate topic.

Still, the expiration date of pomo in LD eventually arrived, slowly replaced by the heuristics of LD itself. Resolutions became unimportant as debaters began to evaluate the nature of debate, and to provide what became known as theory arguments that challenged pretty much everything that the other side said in a round, simply because they had said it. It was the saying, and not what was being said, that became the focus. If the affirmative kicked things off on a topic about meteorology by arguing that the sky is blue, the negative would respond that this was unfair because it limited education and

therefore the affirmative should lose on face. The argument would no longer be about meteorology on either side, but on whether either side's interpretation of, well, weather, was a reasonable one.

It was enough to make an Enlightenment philosopher's head spin. One night Immanuel Kant was seen to rise from his grave and slap down a debater from a famous school in the northeast after a particularly egregious application of theory on the use of the Categorical Imperative. True story!

Identity politics was the next fashion to walk down the LD style runway. White privilege, sexism, ableism, arguments defining the negative perceptions of Asians or Muslims—whatever a side could claim was an a priori disadvantage that rendered the resolution moot, that was what would be argued. At its best, it brought to light social biases that needed to be uncovered. At its worst, it boiled down to a clash of civilizations where the most disadvantaged debater had to win by default because of the disadvantage and not because of anything having to do with debate skills.

Three white students from Texas, suffering from no perceivable inherent (or extrinsically applied) disadvantage were, obviously, at a disadvantage in this arena. Lu and Lulu could run rape, but where would that leave Lou? Other than that, they weren't African- or Asian-American, Jewish, otherly abled, transgendered, or anything even close. They were three boring white kids who, at best, could run a triplets argument complaining about the other two and the inability to be only one, which wasn't going to win a lot of ballots except, maybe, from other triplets.

Which left them no choice but to invent a new debate approach all their own.

It was Lulu who read the following quote from Mark Twain: "I have no special regard for Satan; but, I can at least claim that I have no prejudice against him. It may even be that I lean a little his way, on account of his not having a fair show. All religions issue bibles against him, and say the most injurious things about him, but we never hear his side. We have none but the evidence for the prosecution, and yet we have rendered the verdict. To my mind, this is irregular. It is un-English, it is un-American; it is French."

It is French...

The idea that struck her on reading this, on which Lu and Lou concurred, was that, if every strategy runs its course in the parade of debate content, then sooner or later a new strategy would be needed to replace the identity debates that were now popular. Historically, the French were, first, the philosophes of the Enlightenment, but eventually they became, after we had

gotten over Lafayette and Yorktown, the butt of American humor as epitomized by Samuel Clemens. Which they remained even as they were the cornerstone of the postmodern philosophy that informed much of LD debate in the early 21st Century. Who better, then, to blame everything wrong in the world on, if not the French?

More Mark Twain:

France has neither winter nor summer nor morals—apart from these drawbacks it is a fine country.

There is nothing lower than the human race except the French.

An isolated & helpless young girl is perfectly safe from insult by a Frenchman, if he is dead.

In certain public indecencies the difference between a dog & a Frenchman is not perceptible.

And thus was Crapaud Theory born in the Luce's family room, on a sultry summer Texas night, when most LDers were just beginning to dream of qualifying for next year's COC. Before the night was over, the Luces had a plan that would carry them through their senior year. One after the other they came up with ideas for completely rounded, unique cases, blaming the French for everything under the sun: they had cases, affirmative and negative, on the burden of the Louisiana Purchase, the tragedy of the Battle of Quebec, on the displacement of the Acadians. If it was even remotely French, or even just French-speaking, it was fair game. There was the Escargot conspiracy, the French and Indian War semiotics, the Kermit Kritik (based disingenuously on the very word Crapaud), there was the Snail Snappers counterplan... The list went on. And if it was French, it was on that list. And now, the night before the first day of COC, in the Trump Codswallop Hotel, they are finalizing their latest approach.

“Huguenots,” Lou said. “It’s got to be Huguenots.

Lu looked at him blankly. “Say that again,” she said.

“Huguenots,” Lou repeated. He pronounced it hugo-nots.

Lu and Lulu exchanged glances. The three of them were sitting cross-legged on one of the two double beds in their room.

“He said Huguenots,” Lu pointed out.

Lulu nodded. “And thus the round is lost.”

Lou looked at them blankly. “What do you mean?”

“If you call them hugo-nots, everyone will know what you’re talking about. They’ll have research ready by round two, and we’ll be back where we started. I mean, it’s not like you can really blame all that much on the Huguenots. Their influence isn’t exactly shaking a lot of trees anymore, either here or back in France.”

“Yeah. So? It’s not the greatest strategy in the world, but we can toss the case after a couple of rounds,” Lou said.

“You’re missing the point, brother,” Lu said. “The hugo-nots will be lucky to last until tomorrow lunch. But if we pronounce it Frenchy style—hyou-jen-oh—it will take all day before anyone knows what we’re talking about.”

“And we’ll all be four and oh at that point,” Lulu adds.

Lou looks back and forth between them. “You’re kidding.”

“No, we’re not,” they reply in unison.

“But what if we debate someone who speaks French? What if someone scouting us in the back of the room can speak French?”

“Who the hell speaks French anymore?” Lulu asks. “Half the field and half the coaches are Asian. Everyone else is so American that they’re lucky they speak English. It’s not as if anyone really learns a second language anymore in this country. And even if someone *is* taking French 101, what is the likelihood that they’ll know what the hyou-jen-oh are?”

Lou ponders this for a minute. “It sounds sort of like a cheap win, if you ask me.”

“And your point is?” Lu asks.

“If it wasn’t for cheap wins, there wouldn’t be very many wins at all, brother,” Lulu adds. “This is circuit Lincoln-Douglas. When was the last time someone won around her running a substantive debate on the topic?”

Lou nods. “You’ve got a point. By the way, what is the topic, come to think of it?”

The three LD debaters, among the best in the country, having qualified for the most prestigious tournament in the country with a chance of one of them actually winning it, give one another blank stares.

“Nobody knows?” Lou asks.

“Why would it matter?” Lu counters.

Lou shrugs. “Just wondering. All right. Let’s cut some cards.”

“On the hyou-jen-oh,” Lulu adds.
“Viva les Huguenots!” her siblings reply.
And they begin their prep in earnest.

*Did Monsignor del Fuego enjoy his years in the leper colony?
Will Crapaud Theory take the country by storm?
Will anyone know who the hyou-jen-oh are?
Is the Kermit Kritik related to the Piggy Counterplan?
What exactly is the overall level of sin and vice was within the Catholic Church’s general guidelines that can be expected?*

**If anyone can answer these questions, it won’t be us in our next episode:
“Doesn’t anybody read the reviews anymore, or, Hey, let’s go see Batman v Superman again!”**