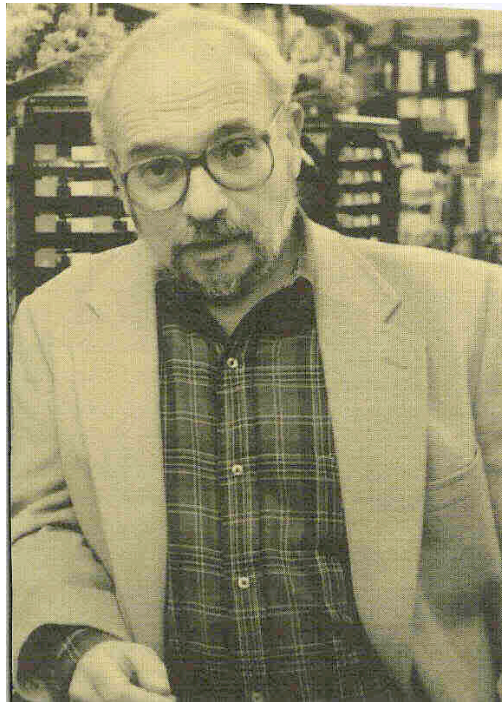


PLATO IN ACTION

Earl Shorris



Writer Earl Shorris believes that understanding the words of Socrates and Plato helps the poor and uneducated more than learning the skills of a technical job. And he is one of those rare people who puts beliefs into action. In 1995 Shorris created a program of study known as the Clemente Course to bring the humanities to residents of impoverished inner-city neighborhoods.

"The humanities have great appeal to give people a sense of self, to see the world and themselves differently in the Greek sense of reflective thinking, of autonomy," he says. "People who know the humanities become good citizens, become active, not acted upon."

The Clemente Course is named after the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance center in lower Manhattan, where the first classes were held. Shorris got the idea for the course while researching his book on poverty, *New American Blues: A Journey to Democracy*, which led him to travel the country and visit some of its poorest areas. On a visit to a women's prison, Shorris met an inmate named Viniece Walker, who told him the poor needed "a moral alternative to the street." Her words struck a chord with Shorris. He set about creating an academic course of study in the humanities that would give the poor skills to deal more effectively with society at large.

The only requirements for the course are that students be between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, have a household income of less than 150 percent of the poverty level, be able to read a tabloid newspaper, and show an intent to finish the course. With the help of his wife, Sylvia,

and some friends, the Clemente Course was born. After the first year when he taught classes in American history and political philosophy, Shorris turned over administration of the program to Bard College.

Five years later, the courses are thriving and have expanded to fourteen courses around the country. Sixty percent of Clemente graduates go on to college, and currently five have full scholarships to Bard. In addition to the Bard program, there are several variants of the course, including programs Native American humanities.

Shorris is a contributing editor of *Harper's Magazine* and a frequent commentator on National Public Radio. He was educated at the University of Chicago, which he entered as a scholarship student at the age of thirteen. He is the author of several novels and nonfiction books. A sequel to *New American Blues* has just been published, entitled *Riches for the Poor: The Clemente Course in the Humanities*.

—Maggie Reichers, **Humanities** (The Magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities), January/February, 2001, in “Making a Difference, The 2000 National Humanities Medalists”