

Professor STORIES

by *Burton Blatt, EdD*

LOOKING FOR ZEBRAS

You know at least one of the many variations of the ancient wisdom that ordinary things occur ordinarily, so that when one hears hoofbeats he should be looking for horses and not zebras. But it has also been said that ordinary people spend their lives trying to be extra-ordinary, while exceptional people—the gifted as well as the handicapped—spend their lives trying to appear ordinary. It's all very complicated and this storyteller won't unravel for you what it is that entices people to look for the unusual, or seek to be different, or bet the long shot; but Charlie Crespi spent a lifetime collecting anecdotes about divergent thinkers and livers, which may have been an attempt to compensate for his ordinary ways and his conventional career.

Charlie Crespi was a professor of fine arts who had the habits of a banker, the appearance of a merchant, the speech of a high school English teacher, and the talent of a good illustrator. He awoke with the birds and called it a day when the farmers had had enough. In between, he took care of his family, taught his classes, counseled his students, painted a picture now and then, and read a book once in a while, among them the condensed kind. He was the most popular professor on campus and, even for a while, thought he was a creative artist. But he learned independently what the social scientists now know, that while most artists live very ordinary lives, the very good ones seem to live as if today is their very last day on earth, that their lives to be true to their art must be a reflection of it—colorful, distorted, idiosyncratic, unpredictable. So, while it was too late (or never possible) for Charlie Crespi to create a great painting, he did work on understanding creativity itself, especially the unique reaction to common stimuli—be it the empty canvas faced by the artist, the worker's blank page, the punster's retort, a man's life. Charlie Crespi devoted himself to learning.

He approved of Jimmy Carter's remark during his last days

in office when asked what he was now going to do, "I intend to become a very good fly fisherman. . . ." He approved even more so when Carter declined to instruct his successor on the presidency with the admission that he had a good deal more advice to give on such matters when he came into office, but what was there to say now?

Charlie Crespi delighted in George P. Elliott's comment that, "Everyone knows that one should be a socialist in ideas, a democrat in politics, and a republican in the way one lives." And he was there to applaud the loudest during the 15th anniversary celebration of the National Endowment for the Humanities when, in quoting Thomas Jefferson, Dumas Malone reminded everyone that, "The world will be saved by knowledge," and that, while we're not doing all that well in either generating knowledge or saving ourselves, we can be sure that the world won't be saved by ignorance.

Charlie Crespi was never much of an artist, never much of an inventor of bon mot, but he surely created a good life for himself and he surely appreciated wisdom and originality. It's also been said that one's life can be a great creation.

Possibly, because common things occur commonly, they are taken for granted, even devalued. But usually (thank whoever), what is very common remains among our most valuable possessions—our families, our work, our values, our religions, ourselves.

What is more common to a human being than himself? And indeed, if one's self isn't common to him, then he has disregarded another adage, "Know thyself." And another, "Be true to yourself." There is the Hasidic tale of the rabbi who, before his death, remarked that in the coming world we'll not be asked, "Why were you not Moses?" but, rather, "Why were you not yourself?"

Charlie Crespi knew something that even great artists don't always know. Be yourself. You too are a creation.