

## REFLECTION AND PASSION IN TEACHING

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In the current efforts to account for the failings of American education, the searchlight of attention has been turned to the quality of teaching. The implication seems to be that teaching, among all the variables that affect colleges and schools, is most susceptible to management and repair. The themes recur in state after state: career ladders, merit pay, teacher testing, job analysis, effectiveness measures, definitions of "mastery." Salary increases are made contingent on their adoption. Official interest, however, focuses on their motivational and managerial aspects; and there is a taken-for-grantedness with respect to the idea that enhanced teacher quality will increase student achievement.

When taken as a literal doctrine, Israel Scheffler's statement of some years ago, "There can be no teaching without learning," becomes a slogan.<sup>1</sup> But in times of educational inertia, he said, a slogan of that sort takes on practical import: "To speak . . . of teaching as selling and of learning as buying, to suggest that teaching be compared with business methods improvable by reference to effects on the consumer, [is] to signal strikingly the intent to support reform of teaching."<sup>2</sup> The buying and selling metaphor may not be used today, but clearly a very similar mode of thinking underlies current "reform" proposals. The insistent emphasis on achievement and the dangers we are said to face if achievement levels are not raised make the "success" use of "to teach" dominate, if not overwhelm, the "intentional" use of the term. Yet most practitioners still believe themselves to be teaching if they are engaged in a particular kind of deliberate, goal-oriented activity, in efforts to move others to learn to learn. Because of the persistence of reassuring slogans (those Scheffler called "rallying symbols of the key ideas and attitudes of educational movements,"<sup>3</sup>) the intentional dimension is being overlooked, along with many *possible* ways of thinking about the teaching act. It is with possible ways that I shall be concerned.

### The Prevailing Mode of Rationality

What were called "business methods" in 1960 might be called technological paradigms today, and it is not surprising to find many of those working for school improvement and efficiency turning toward models of technical rationality. Donald Schon draws dramatic attention to this when he describes "the crisis in confidence in professional knowledge," including ours. He attributes this in part to a reliance on modes of professional knowledge that cannot account for the processes essential to competent practice: "making sense of uncertainty, performing artistically, setting problems, and choosing among competing paradigms. . . ."<sup>4</sup> What we do, he tells us, is use a model of technical rationality that makes us think of intelligent practice as a series of instrumental decisions which we try to make more and more rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique -- in our case, in the guise of various psychologies, certain of the social sciences, or the instructional and computer sciences.

Making such a point, Donald Schon summons up for me a body of literature and understandings that is, in many cases, repressed by the present reliance on "rallying symbols." Michael Polanyi's concept of "tacit knowledge";<sup>5</sup> John Dewey's notion of mind "as a verb";<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Ryle's emphasis on "knowing how" rather than "knowing that";<sup>7</sup> the

inquiries into process, improvisation, open-endedness, and becoming: all these have been set aside under the pressure of perceived "crisis" and conceived "risk." Schon moves me to wonder once again about the relation between scientific theory and technique and the diverse, unstable, particular situations in which teachers do their work. He makes me speculate, not so much about the uses of science *per se*, but about the impacts of positivism and technicism on the discourse and the practice of "educational reform."

Following this path, I cannot but recall some words from the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who also wondered much about the relation between science and lived life. He wrote:

Scientific thinking, a thinking which looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general, must return to the "there is" which underlies it: to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body -- not that possible body which we may legitimately think of as an information machine, but that actual body I call mine, this sentinel standing quietly at the command of my words and my acts.<sup>8</sup>

That excerpt is from "Eye and Mind," an essay about lived life, painting, and the visible world. Yes, and about action and passion intertwined, and about perspective, and about possibility. It is an essay that moves me to ponder the degree to which our favored mode of rationality makes us focus on the classroom-in-general, or children-in-general, or teaching-in-general, and whether we are distancing teachers from their actual bodies and asking them to treat themselves (as well as their students) as "information machines."

I am concerned, certainly, about competent practice and about what Schon calls "reflection-in-action" as an alternative to technological rationality. But I need to say that I am concerned about something in addition to competent action, important as that is for us to define and understand. We ought to talk more readily about what that practice is *for*, about the purposes we define for ourselves at this peculiar moment of our history. I realize that the word "excellence" is intended to encompass and summarize them: excellence defined in terms of higher standards, measurable achievements that must be increased because our nation is at risk. And how are we at risk? Because our defense capability is not what it should be (despite MX missiles and Star Wars research), because of the deficit, because we cannot be sure of our technological primacy in the world. There is some talk about disenfranchisement (by illiteracy or lack of "character"), poor preparation for the world of work, and the absence of a "common culture" (or the decline of what is now called "cultural literacy"). The tone, though alarmist, is generally cool and assured; the discourse is infused with "power" in Michael Foucault's sense;<sup>9</sup> the implications are meant to seem inescapable. *If we have the proper knowledge base, if we become more rigorous, if we pay more heed to content and less to method, if we underwrite merit and mastery, if we enlist more experts among ourselves, we will solve what are largely technical problems and will no longer be at risk.*

The other side of what is being asked of us derives from the Presidential celebrations of the "economic miracle" the conservatives have wrought, the new affirmations of patriotism, the recovery of strength and self-confidence, the high-tech utopia opening before us, the return of privatist and family values, and the rest. Associated with all these are the so-called "initiatives" now being undertaken by the federal government: vouchers, enterprise zones, constitutional amendments barring abortions, demands for school prayer. We can only assume, according to the official point of view, that -- as American professionals, men and women ostensibly committed to the "national interest" -- we are expected to serve the futurist cause, as it is currently defined. If nothing else, we are expected to prepare those

with the potential to push back the technological and military frontiers and (like Rambo, perhaps) do what we can to eradicate old embarrassments, old defeats. We are expected to turn against what is scornfully described as the "liberalism" of the past, while admitting the futility of government efforts to provide support systems for the sick and the excluded, or for the homeless, the non-white, the handicapped, the hungry, those unable (or unwilling) to take care of themselves. Most ironically of all, we are expected quietly to acknowledge that "big government" and large-scale social (and educational) spending have endangered us and will endanger us a nation, even as they erode self-reliance and personal responsibility.

### Voicing Other Visions

The lack of dialogue in the public spaces today makes people forget that there are other American traditions, other visions of what constitute the good life and the humane society. It seems necessary to me for educators, at the very least, to choose themselves as an "articulate public"<sup>10</sup> if only to perform the educative function of pointing to alternative resources and potentials in our traditions. There are continuities; there are commitments that once appeared to identify us as a people. It may be part of our obligation to draw attention to them once again, so that the official articulations and explanations do not become confused with some objective reality readable from only one perspective, closed to questioning and critique. I believe, for instance, that a range of promises, implicit and explicit, have been made in this country over the past 50 years that, if broken, will put us at risk in another fashion.

Hannah Arendt has written that our ability to make and keep promises sets up "in the ocean of uncertainty, which is the future by definition, islands of security without which continuity would be impossible" in human relationships.<sup>11</sup> "Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises," she said, "we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each . . . lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities -- a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfills, can dispel."<sup>12</sup> Promises depend on the presence of others, a plurality of others, since no one is bound to keep a promise made only to himself or herself. Perhaps the key term here is "plurality," since that suggests multiple perspectives and reduces the likelihood of objectivist one-dimensionality.

It appears to me that significant promises have been made in our history as more and more people have become visible in the public realm, as more and more voices have been heard. Many have been made to and in behalf of those least advantaged (individuals who did not deserve their disadvantage any more than others have deserved their advantages), as John Rawls has reminded us,<sup>13</sup> to children, to the aged, to the disabled, to those without access to books or to the arts. And indeed, the identities of many educators have been confirmed in *their* promising by a "light shed over the public realm through the presence of others. . . ."<sup>14</sup> There is a sense in which teaching, teaching in good faith, involves a kind of promising, even though the consequences can never be guaranteed. In any case, we need to think on occasion of the injury done by the breaking of promises in our society. They are promises having to do with justice, freedom, and care for others. To ignore them may also put us at risk.

We are at risk, therefore, for reasons other than the familiar reports have defined; and, again, I would say that educators may be responsible for formulating them and giving them voice. I, for example, see a danger in the faces upturned to the platforms where television evangelists hold sway, in the crowds demonstrating outside abortion clinics, in the

rationales offered for bombing those clinics, in the support for subway vigilanteism, in the reminders that we must prepare for Armageddon rather than resist nuclear buildups, in the politics of image and theatre, in the burned-out buildings in the cities, in the homeless locked out of railroad terminals, in the suicides on the farms.

For educators, this is not a narrowly partisan position, I would insist, because teaching, as many have viewed the activity, is an undertaking oriented to empowering persons to become different, to think critically and creatively, to pursue meanings, to make increasing sense of their actually lived worlds. Wholly unlike "selling" or drilling or training, teaching is oriented to provoking persons to care about what they are coming to understand, to attend to their situations with solicitude, to be mindful, to be concerned, to be fully present and alive. Democratic education, certainly, involves provoking persons to get up from their seats, not to come to Christ or to be magically cured, but to say something in their own voices, against their own biographies and in terms of what they cherish in their shared lives, what they authentically hold dear. It involves getting them to leave their assigned places in the crowds and even in the marches, and to come together freely in their plurality. It means creating an "in-between" among them,<sup>15</sup> a space where they can continue appearing as authentic individuals, each with a distinctive perspective on what they have come to hold in common, a space where something new can find expression and be explored and elaborated on, where it can grow. It is when people become challengers, when they take initiatives, that they begin to create the kinds of spaces where dialogue can take place and freedom can appear. And it is then, and probably only then, that people begin thinking about working together to bring into being a better, fairer, more humane state of things.

What has this to do with reflective practice or with teaching? I believe that spaces ought to be opened whenever there are schools and colleges, and I believe there ought to be more openings to the surrounding world. It is difficult to imagine worthwhile questions arising without such openings. It is difficult to imagine students discovering what they think and what they do not yet know if there is no space of conversation, no space of engagement in diversity. A sense of agency is required of the teacher if such things are to happen; and it is hard to conceive of a teacher who is a reflective practitioner but who lacks a sense of agency. If we are aware of this, we cannot but be concerned about the erosion of that sense of agency in the world around us. The erosion is due not only to the reliance upon a "thinking which looks on from above" and thinks of the "object-in-general," nor to reliance on the model of technical rationality. Nor is it due solely to demands that teachers respond to prescriptions delivered from without, comply with extrinsic demands, pass a panoply of tests. It is due as well to the cost-benefit language that fills the air and thrusts so many of us into helpless silence.

It is due to a spreading impassivity, a distancing, a fearful privatism. We speak on occasion about connectedness, but we take too few risks in its name. I think of Christopher Lasch's discussion of the "minimal self," of consumerism, narcissism, "instrumental reason," and the preoccupation with technique. It is the deterioration of public life, together with the privatization and trivialization of moral ideas, that prevents a collaborative assault on the environmental and military difficulties confronting modern nations. But the party of Narcissus does not understand the source of these difficulties; the confusion of practice with technique."<sup>16</sup> Is it not the responsibility of educators to nourish new or alternative modes of understanding, to enable "the party of Narcissus" to see a bit more clearly than it presently sees?



## Commitment To Reflective Practice

Considerations like these ought to inform the teaching enterprise if indeed we are to be committed to reflective practice. It is almost as if people, because they feel helpless and powerless and mystified, perceive no alternative to the party of Narcissus. We know that when consciousness splits off too abruptly from the political or the public sphere, the idea of the self is presented as something that can be realized only in private life. At once we realize that the self can never be actualized through solely private experiences, no matter how extraordinary those experiences might be, and surely not the ideal of the teacher's self. Connectedness is required, an overcoming of impassivity, a capacity to notice what lies around us, and a commitment to the constitution of what might be called a common world.

The reports we have been reading do not touch on matters like these. Nor do they suggest the passion required for any of this to occur. "The power of the passions," Robert Solomon has written, "is the power of possibilities."<sup>17</sup> He meant rational passion, and he had in mind a grasp beyond the actual, the given. This may well be what lies at the core of human beings' involvement with our worlds. Without such a grasp, a reaching toward what is not yet, we would be submerged forever in the everydayness of what is called the "given"; and our lives would strike us as largely meaningless. We would have no inclination to teach or to learn. Or to be concerned. To be concerned, after all, is to be conscious of a web of possibilities; to experience passion is to be invested in what might or might not be. What troubles me is the lack of concern I feel around me, the routines and automatisms that have replaced investment in possibility. What troubles me as much is the neglect of freedom in its active sense, the freedom linked to an awareness of the unpredictable, the possible. What has replaced that is a preoccupation with negative freedom, freedom *from* entanglements and encumbrances. Important though that may be, what is grasped and sought through the taking of personal initiative in the midst of and in relation to others seems to be of greater existential significance. I am speaking of freedom as an achievement rather than an endowment or a "right"; and I am associating it with passion and the power of possibilities.

Freedom in this sense must be intentionally and reflectively chosen and pursued within lived situations where alternative modes of action are not identified in advance. Often, submergence in those situations is such that there appears to be no possibility of things being otherwise than they are. Or the barriers seem so insurmountable, so much a part of what is given, simply *there*, that surpassing or resisting appears to be unthinkable. If this is coupled with the inertia of comfort or simple conventionality, the barriers are scarcely noticed; and people do not even notice what stands in their way.

A recent reading of a number of Czech novels has sharpened my awareness of this condition. Novels make one notice oftentimes what one might not otherwise have seen. This may be particularly true of literature written by those deprived of their human rights. Such works are disturbing, provocative, and recognizable very often; they are likely to move many readers into questioning about passivity, acquiescence -- and freedom and what it means.

In Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the questions are aroused through a consideration of *kitsch*, totalitarian and democratic *kitsch*. Wherever it exists, writes Kundera, it finds expressions in large abstractions, abstractions that weigh down heavily, no matter who the individual may be. It often has to do with what he calls the "dictatorship of the heart" to which "the mind finds it indecent to object."<sup>18</sup> It may describe feelings people in the mass too easily share: about brass bands marching down a street, adorable children running in the grass, betrayed motherlands, old-time pieties, simple truths that can be counted upon to move almost anyone to cheers or tears. Totalitarian *kitsch*

precludes all questioning; democratic *kitsch* often lulls people into not asking questions at all. Kundera writes that the true function of *kitsch* is to serve as a folding screen set up to curtain death. It functions as a means of denial, a way of putting a smiling face on everything, of convincing oneself that there is no need for reflection, that all is well. Kundera talks about the need to refuse the idea that all answers are given in advance. "A question is like a knife that slices through the stage backdrop and gives us a look at what lies behind it."<sup>19</sup> I am suggesting that the one who gives up questioning, who respects the folding screens, is in danger of a type of corruption, of being sucked into the collectivity, of giving up all sense of authorship or agency. I believe that folding screens should be, certainly for educators, a matter of profound concern.

Many of the novels coming from abroad challenge half-educated simplifications, and there is a recurrent reminder that the only thing antagonistic to human beings is the absence of perceived antagonisms or contradictions. If freedom is in part, a capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise, it may be endangered less by external constraints than by acquiescence to the given, a submission to what is. "I am what I am," says the unfree person. "What do you expect?" Or, when that person is urged to take a fresh look or to learn something new, he or she is likely to say, "I know, I know." There is no consciousness of obstruction when a person has no desire to change or to question, if there is nothing in particular he or she wants to say. Under dictatorships, the people who have an awareness of freedom are those who have something to say, who *want* to speak and write, and who experience the dictatorship as a concrete barrier to their very being. They take the obstruction personally, and, in order to be in the world and among others, they feel compelled to try to break through or to transcend. For that reason, the most potent affirmations with respect to freedom and human rights are to be found in the literature coming out of Latin America, South Africa, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Too many American novels, in contrast, deal with loss, sex, drugs, dislocation, violence, she-devils, witches, therapy, crime, second marriage, money. With the exception of certain novels by minority writers (especially black women), they seldom deal with freedom or human rights.

I know. Many will insist that we are free, that men in overcoats are unlikely to come in the middle of the night and break down our doors, that (generally speaking) we can say and print and even teach what we believe. But this is part of my point. Complacency with regard to this belief that we are "endowed" and entitled may well stand in the way of growth, change, and reflective practice. Also, the taken-for-grantedness of it may drain life of passion, as it cancels out the real power of possibilities. Of course we enjoy (or assume we do) freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of worship, and the rest. We are free to get punk haircuts, dye half our hair pink, have babies out of wedlock, abandon the babies, sleep on park benches, smoke pot in subway cars. All these represent our negative freedoms, freedom from interference in many (if not all) areas of our lives. It is strange, is it not, that most current interferences (when it comes to the right to choose and the right to die) have to do with childbirth and with death?

As I have said, negative freedoms cannot be underestimated, not in a world overshadowed by totalitarianisms. I would, however, call attention to the fact that many of the instances of freedom I have mentioned rarely involve deliberate and considered choice. And I would remind you that negative freedoms, when generalized or embodied in policy (as in the case of deregulation or *laissez-faire* business practices or the slackening of environmental protection or the erosion of affirmative action policies), often result in personal injury, pollution, exclusion, or inhumane neglect. The freedom I have in mind is not an interior state nor is it an original or natural endowment. It is always a function of

some sort of membership or participation; it has to be continually sought in the face of resistances; it can never be finally achieved.

Like John Dewey, I would "seek for freedom in something which comes to be, in a certain kind of growth; in consequences rather than antecedents."<sup>20</sup> The implications for teaching and teacher education seem clear to me. Dewey's conception of imagination relates to this and heightens what it signifies. "Imagination," he wrote, "is the only gateway" through which meanings derived from prior experiences find their way into the present and make present experiences more conscious. Without imagination, without consciousness, he said, "there is only recurrence, complete uniformity; the resulting experience is routine and mechanical. . . ."<sup>21</sup> And a conscious experience is always one that opens to what is uncertain, to what is not yet. Recurrence, uniformity, routine: all these fix the human being in place and undercut the likelihood of a search for freedom, as they do the sense of new beginnings and of ventures into the unknown. What is teaching, what is reflective action, lacking these?

### Positive Freedom and Imagining Alternative Actions

Dewey also believed that freedom can be achieved only in resistance to the given but never in isolation. It has to do with becoming different, with transforming mere preferences into conscious and intelligent choices. As such choices become more and more thoughtful and diversified, the range of possible action expands, and people are likely to imagine new alternatives, to reach further and further beyond themselves. Is that not what education should be for? Surely, it is to teach a range of ways of knowing in a diversity of domains. It is to communicate a sense of oughtness, of craft, an understanding of what it signifies to do things well. But education is also to suggest how such norm-governed knowing can open unexpected doorways, disclose possible occasions for actions never imagined before.

Paradigms can be found in the natural and human sciences, even in mathematics and literary criticism. I am given to finding mine in art experiences. I cannot but think of how poems open to me when I read them -- not sloppily, not lazily, nor cursorily, but read them - well. I cannot but think of how the Caravaggio paintings I saw a while ago disclosed themselves to me because I had come to know a little about moving into pictorial frames, experiencing the space moving outward, noticing color relationships: the dark coming, that startling, tragic light on faces, arms, hands that could have been my own. And, as in the case of painters like Turner, Cezanne, van Gogh, Hopper, I realized that there would be more to see each time I returned, that worlds reveal themselves in response to tacit knowing and to conscious "knowing how." And, I believe, each time I went back, I would become different from the way I was before. How would the model of technical rationality account for what is involved in teaching someone, enabling someone to have experiences like those?

Obviously, such a capability must be consciously nurtured and consciously sought, and I would say that it always involves an overcoming of obstacles, internal as well as external. They can be such obstacles as mere inertia or lack of opportunity or cognitive (or imaginative, or perceptual) deficit. They can be the barriers raised by bureaucracy, advertising, technical language, sexism, fatalism, all the factors that make individuals feel their condition is the effect of prior causes, that they are caught in a mechanistic network and there is nothing they can do. Freedom is pursued only by those who refuse to accept all this as part of the given or any objectively existent reality. In teaching situations, this means trying to empower people to think about, to interpret, to gain perspective on what seems to work on them from without. It means trying to enable them to formulate it as a task or a problem. Of course there are limits imposed by the actualities of lived situations. But there is always the possibility of viewing those situations in a variety of ways, of *choosing* their



meanings, of identifying feasible alternatives. And there is, again, the potential power of the passions, the projection into the future, the reach beyond.

It is this projection that enables individuals to create life projects for themselves. With their objective situations as starting points, human beings do define themselves by their projects. They move beyond the given by doing so; they continue, as it were, to produce themselves by the work they do, the *praxis* in which they engage. Their needs, their passions, and their thoughts all participate as individuals move outside themselves toward something new. "This is what we call existence," wrote Jean-Paul Sartre, "and by this we do not mean a stable substance which rests in itself, but rather a perpetual disequilibrium, a wrenching away from itself, with all its body."<sup>22</sup>

The teaching I would like to see in this time of *kitsch* and passive acquiescence is the kind that makes such disequilibrium conceivable, that moves the young to take consciously critical and cognitive action with respect to their lived worlds. Of course it requires passion, and yet, for all the expressed concern about apathy and indifference, passion is never mentioned with regard to education. This may be because of the management or the technical orientation, associated as it is with the dispassionate and the instrumental. The tendency is, therefore, to think in terms of behavior rather than of action, since behavior lends itself to statistical determination and prediction, and action opens to the unpredictable. People become, as it were, behaving organisms, the more they accede to the regular, the predictable, and accept them as part of their everydayness. They live, as it were, up against walls without experiencing them as obstacles. They are unlikely to become different, in Dewey's sense; they are unlikely to see.

The freedom I have been talking about is associated with the power to act, an achieved power to act; and this involves embarking on new beginnings, moving (with an awareness of agency) toward possibility -- which is why learning to learn is ordinarily conceived in terms of cognitive action rather than with sequences of behavior. It is why I believe that teachers, in addition to empowering students to see through multiple perspectives, need to stimulate imaginative thinking, the kind that summons up alternative realities for those sunken in what seems given. I cannot but recall Alice Walker's now familiar text, *The Color Purple*, and Celie's journey from objectness and acquiescence to articulation, naming, conversation -- to vital existence in the world. Her becoming different would have been inconceivable without Shug Avery moving her to wrench away, to experience a passion for the world. Celie is brought to see that, in her case, the given is embodied in "man." Shug tells her: "Man corrupt everything. . . . He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost. . . . Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock. But this hard work, let me tell you [Celie writes]. He been there so long, he don't want to budge. He threaten lightning, floods, and earthquake. Us Fight. I hardly pray at all. Every time I conjure up a rock, I throw it."<sup>23</sup> A teacher need not be, cannot be, a Shug Avery, but a reflective teacher ought to be able to move the Celies in his or her class to resist what seems immovable, to name what seems that way as problem or as task. Of course it is hard work. We need more than instrumental rationality if we want our students to conjure up or to imagine the equivalent of flowers, wind, water -- and the color purple that many do not notice at all.

The ability to reach beyond, to envisage a wider span of understanding and a better order of things enables persons to perceive the deficiencies in what exists, to become capable of indignation or even outrage. Outrage is something other than a recognition of *kitsch*. In outrage (at "man" corrupting everything, at homelessness, at burned-out buildings, at child



abuse, at arms buildups, at neglect), there may be efforts to reach out with others to do something, to repair. To feel that way is to recognize the importance of reflection as a mode of release. I think of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, which is about so much more than the murder of monks in a monastery, more than semiotics or the deciphering of signs and symbols and cryptograms. It is about the evils of secret knowledge, knowledge as something to be possessed rather than disseminated among a public. "If this book were to become . . . had become an object for open interpretation," the blind monk says with respect to Aristotle's work, "we would have crossed the last boundary."<sup>24</sup> Not only is "open interpretation" considered a threat; so is any attempt to cross beyond the limits set by the possessors of the library in question, the makers of their own "folding screens." The library is destroyed at last because it is impenetrable; and that makes me think, not only of esoteric knowledge, but of technical knowledge, of everything that exists in sterile spaces, apart from the "sensible and opened world" with which I began.

### Teaching With Passion and Reflection

It is with the sensible and opened world of practice with which I choose to end. Donald Schon, developing his notion of "reflection-in-action," describes a public school built around a theory of knowledge all too familiar to those of us brought up with the model of technical rationality. "There is a concept of privileged knowledge," Schon writes, "which it is the business of teachers to teach and students to learn. This concept of knowledge is embodied in texts, curriculum, lesson plans, examinations; indeed, it is institutionalized in every aspect of the school. Teachers are seen as technical experts who impart privileged knowledge to students. . . ."<sup>25</sup>

If it is indeed the case that, in a period like this, we ought to be making particular efforts to provoke students to think and speak for themselves, the approach to teaching outlined (but not endorsed) by Schon is entirely antithetical to the kind of practice we ought to be considering. For one thing, it is extraordinarily difficult to justify any knowledge as "privileged," now that we know as much as we do about the diverse approaches even within the various specialties, and now that so many recognize the importance of the kind of perspectival and interpretative knowing of which Eco's blind monk was so afraid. Moreover, many professionals now realize that their practice is almost always situation-specific. To depend upon generalized formulas and quantitative measures, to limit our concern to student success and failure in the assimilation of curriculum materials and the mastery of skills, is (more often than not) to distance the particularities of classroom life. It is to act as if the classroom were indeed an "object-in-general," not an unstable, unpredictable human situation identical to no other in the world.

Like a growing number of contemporary inquirers, I am trying to hold a lens close to the actualities of practice. I am trying to imagine perplexed and often uncertain teachers in daily encounters with young people, each of whom is to be "tested" to see if he or she has achieved. I think of how little many teachers know about their students' diverse lives and thinking processes, how little they can know because of the paucity of dialogue in the classroom space. There are so few moments for interchange; there is such difficulty in recapturing an ordinary language in which authentic talk can take place. What opportunities exist to discover what students take for granted? How can teachers find out who students think is on the "box of grits," what (for them) is "all over the radio" or the television screen? How many teachers can determine what students intuitively understand, what contradicts what they feel they know, what causes them to become confused and make mistakes, what discourages or angers them to such a degree that they drop out of school?

This may account for the appeal of the idea of "reflection-in-action" (and, again, "action" implies the taking of initiatives). To reflect in the course of situated teaching is consciously to attend to what is happening and to those who are present with the teacher in a shared moment of lived life. Such reflection is not unlike what is required if works of art are to be brought alive in experience. Tacit knowing plays a part; intuitive awareness and imagination feed into the grasping of a painting, a poem, a dance. The emotions, too, are engaged. Feeling works with cognition in the apprehending of the Cezanne landscape, the Eliot poem, the Balachine ballet, *and* in the situations of practice where so many elements and nuances must be discerned.

My adversary point in this moment of "reform" concerns the significance of empowering diverse individuals to think, to be mindful, to make sense, and to reach beyond. I am not suggesting that we set aside subject matters or the disciplines, which obviously provide perspectives, modes of ordering and symbolizing and articulating experience. Nor am I arguing against the kind of professional education that introduces teachers-to-be to the human sciences, the natural sciences, the arts and humanities, and the technical literacy that can inform situations of practice as well. They offer resources for sense-making when it comes to such situations. They provide the teachers with resources, with the knowledge necessary to single out what needs attention, when they want to identify alternatives or frame hypotheses or discover precedents. They offer a consciousness of how situations ought to be interpreted and structured in accord with changing standards governing the forms of knowledge, or in accord with significant pre-judgments or moral principles that are shared. This is quite different from the application of technical or scientific constructs to fluid situations where they frequently do not apply; it is quite different from the application of conclusions from research external to the actual concerns, the unease of teachers and students immediately involved. I am not sure but that one of the unwanted consequences of technical rationality and a skills orientation has been the desire for the folding screen, the submission to *kitsch*, or the hidden fear. But if we are the kinds of educators who want to provoke, to motivate persons to move and become challengers, I believe we have to reconceive.

And to stir ourselves, to disturb, to transform. An emotion, a passion can be a transformation of the world. It can break through the fixities; it can open to the power of possibility. It may even render practice more reflective. We need to open spaces for this in education at this time in history, to renew as we reform.

### References

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