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Vito Perrone and the Struggle for Democratic Schools

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North Dakota, large in territory and sky, light in population. Grand Forks, a small city on the banks of the Red River (which famously runs north), a university town, located on the far eastern border of the state and, in latitude, some 60 miles to the north of Quebec City, Canada. In the winter, snow crystals glint in the air even on sunny days. The first semester I spent at the university (1982), euphemistically known as the Spring Semester, temperatures were often 20 or more degrees below zero and once dipped to -40° (without factoring in the wind chill). Grand Forks, ND, might not seem to the uninitiated a likely locus for revolutionary thinking about education and social action. Yet, in the period from the late '60s until well into the '80s, it was exactly that.

1972

I first met Vito Perrone at what turned out to be the charter meeting of the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation (NDSG). The year was 1972. I wasn't previously acquainted with Dean Perrone, though as a resident of Vermont, another rural state, I knew that in the late sixties he upended traditional teacher education to create the New School of Behavioral Studies at the University of North Dakota.

The mission of the New School was comprehensive, including all levels of education. Among its aims was an exchange program that sent master's interns into rural North Dakota schools as temporary replacements for the many North Dakota teachers lacking four-year diplomas. The teachers, in turn, rotated to the university to take the courses required for a baccalaureate degree, bringing with them their years of classroom experience. Ranked 50th among the states in the educational preparation of teachers, a specific aim of the exchange was to improve North Dakota's educational standing. Of further

reaching consequence, the exchange set in motion a larger aim for which to my knowledge there is no precedent: to establish a reciprocal collegial relationship between university and schools as co-partners, co-equally responsible for shaping the educational opportunities for all North Dakotans.

Vito's conviction that "[u]niversities and schools can develop meaningful relationships in which each influences the other's directions" (Perrone, 1983, p. 40) altered at a stroke the top down structure which positions the university at the pinnacle and the schools and classroom teachers on rungs far down the academic ladder. It was in this spirit that the New School matched a novel interdisciplinary program merging liberal arts and professional training at the teacher education level with advocacy for informal schools for children, promoting for students at all levels more intensive learning opportunities and greater learner autonomy (Perrone, 1983).

I don't recall how this revolutionary program got the name "New School," but it was a happy choice, one that symbolizes the novel and equal footing established by Vito's experiment. Rightly, both he and the New School received national attention and recognition, attracting to the university young people, some recently returned from the Peace Corps, with strong commitments to activism and change. For those of us at Prospect School in North Bennington, Vermont, itself founded on Deweyan principles, it was exciting to hear tantalizing bits of news about the North Dakota experiment, later reorganized and called the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), and reports of its positive impact on both teacher education and the schools.

The experiment in North Dakota was not happening in a vacuum. In the late '60s and early '70s, widespread social and political change was happening across the country. There was a striving for new openness in society and a related push for the positive value of diversity and for a more pluralistic, heterodox society. There was a struggle for a society and schools that put the well-being and selfhood of children and of all citizens ahead of wealth for the few, ahead of corporate interests, ahead of war-making—ahead of "the military/industrial complex."

In the midst of this ferment, progressive educational practices—for years largely happening only in a handful of private schools, almost exclusively white—were gaining footholds in major urban centers

including Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City. Revitalized by the British Infant School Movement, a vision of more open and equitable schools was being enacted in a subset of the National Follow Through Programs, notably those sponsored by the University of North Dakota, the Education Development Center (Boston), and Bank Street College (New York City). Lillian Weber's Open Corridor Program was rapidly making inroads in the New York City public school system. Yet, even as these programs unfolded and as new and more democratic practices were brought into the schools, their very existence was threatened by a counter-push for mass-scale evaluation of these programs by means of standardized tests.

It is in this context that a call came from Lillian Weber, Director of the Workshop Center for Open Education at City College, inviting Prospect to send a representative to a meeting on evaluation to be held in North Dakota and convened by Vito Perrone. Prospect had been experimenting with other ways of doing evaluation almost from the day the school opened in 1965: documenting the school and the curriculum, conducting longitudinal studies of children and their growth as thinkers and learners, and collecting children's visual and written works. By 1972, we had an abundance of useful material to contribute to a discussion on evaluation. Indeed, we had been on the lookout for just such an opportunity as this meeting promised to provide. We accepted the invitation with alacrity.

Picture this: Seventeen educators and researchers, all with progressive leanings, mostly from the Northeast, arrive in Grand Forks, North Dakota. The meeting begins in an atmosphere of urgency and concern. Intense discussion ranges across a variety of topics, all related to the backlash against the progressive values that have drawn us to North Dakota. Evaluation is the front burner issue and the one on which Vito focuses and refocuses our attention. We talk about alternatives to testing. We need approaches to evaluation that fit with our progressive principles. In this regard, Vito's and others' interest in the documentary materials from Prospect and in Prospect's commitment to studies spanning children's school lives is immediate and sustained.

It is a highly productive three days. As the conference draws to a close, Vito asks whether the group wishes to continue. There is unanimous and enthusiastic agreement.

What has happened that the group so quickly coalesced into a working unit that, as time will tell, will sustain itself across the next three decades? True, there are common commitments and there is the pressure of external forces inimical to virtually every program represented at the conference. Equally, nearly all of us in that room are extended to the fullest in our own communities. There are tensions and differences that might have undercut the new alliance. What sustains a group that meets only once a year, has no formal membership, and has no organizational superstructure? What keeps a group from fracturing when differences at times have been intense and even bitter?

The reason for this staying power against all odds isn't difficult to find. The potency of Vito's leadership as forger and steward of the North Dakota Study Group is by now legendary. There is his unparalleled ability to garner resources, human and fiscal. There is his capacity to make room for points of view. Most of all there is Vito's unshakeable confidence that people of good will can work through differences and that change, even painful change, can be supported. Without Vito's steadiness and confidence in the group, there might have been a couple more meetings in response to the urgency of what drew us to North Dakota in 1972, and there, I think, it would have rested.

Looking back at those early years, it seems to me that, though shy of the usual organizational structures, the North Dakota Study Group, under Vito's leadership, was a quintessential fit with what Margaret Mead designates the small working conference. That is, it brought together co-equals, joined by a common commitment, to learn from each other and to establish working coalitions with the aim of furthering an agreed upon mission. This isn't a usual mission or a usual way for professional organizations to function. North Dakota Study Group isn't a job market event to boost people's professional careers. It isn't an arena for famous people on the circuit to give well-honed speeches. While outside speakers are sometimes invited to address plenary sessions, more often they are from the ranks of the group itself. Instead of endless sessions for presentation of research papers, there are plentiful opportunities for small groups to meet to discuss works in progress and issues confronting particular communities and schools. In all these respects, NDSG holds a virtually unique position in the educational arena.

If there is something of the marvelous about the North Dakota Study Group, and I believe there is, it is that NDSG fulfills Vito's confidence that through the exchange and analysis of ideas, people working together can make a difference, can create conditions for change, and can also themselves change. When I first inspected my copy of Vito's stellar book, *Teacher With a Heart: Reflections on Leonard Covello and Community* (1998), I noticed that the back cover bio says merely that Vito Perrone is "an active member of the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation." I smiled and thought to myself, only Vito himself could be the author of *that* understatement! Vito is the North Dakota Study Group's defining member—its founder, its intellectual leader, and its conscience.

Setting Things in Motion; Reading Between the Lines

The North Dakota Study Group of 2005 isn't the North Dakota Study Group of 1972—nor was it destined to be. With a certain inevitability, the demands and urgencies of one era give way to others of equal intensity in those that follow. It is also the case that Vito's leadership, as I have observed it over the years, isn't about control and it isn't about ownership. It is about setting things in motion and what I will call reading between the lines.

To set things in motion, foregoing control is risky. It happens all the time in life. A baby is born whose life is untellable in advance. There is a fortuitous (or not fortuitous) confluence of events that upends the status quo of a life or of a nation. There is unfolding. There is major upheaval. Change may be the only aspect of life that is wholly predictable, and it is a truism that not all change leads to hoped for outcomes. Setting NDSG in motion was to sail it forth with uncertainty as to outcomes. So was the launching of the New School. Each came into being in response to particular circumstances, at a particular time, in a particular location. Each happened because there was need and each required vision and a sustained commitment to process for what Myles Horton (1991) calls "the long haul."

Vito is the touchstone for both of these experiments because of qualities that are rare and hard to pinpoint. Vito isn't a master-minder. He isn't motivated by advancement of his own personal agenda. He

isn't an ideologue. He is, though, an acute observer of political and social currents and conflicts, a skilled listener with an attuned ear for the values at stake. He is equally adept at what Myles Horton (1991) describes as a kind of dual vision, with one eye focused on where people are right now and the other on the possibilities for movement toward larger and more humane goals (p. 131). Elaborating the point, Horton asserts that "People have a potential for growth" and though "[t]his kind of potential cannot guarantee a particular outcome ... it's what you build on" (p. 133). When he adds to this the thought that "What people need are experiences in democracy and in making democratic decisions that affect their lives and their communities" (p. 133), I hear Vito's voice echoing in those words.

I have referred to Myles Horton several times now, and not by accident. As leaders, it seems to me that Vito Perrone and Myles Horton have a lot in common. In the early days of the North Dakota Study Group, I watched Vito's dedication to this kind of growth and democratic process in action with some astonishment. The process was seemingly simple, almost effortless. In my mind's eye, I can picture Vito convening the meeting, sketching in broad, sure strokes the education issues and problems confronting us as educators, relating them at every turn to a wider political, economic, and social context. He is seated as always among us, speaking in his low-key, quiet voice. There is no exhortation or ideological imperative, there are no dramatic pronouncements. The tone is conversational, the facts abundant and precise, the effect powerfully cumulative. The commanding width of view and knowledge speak for themselves, establishing the context and setting the tone for the meeting.

Along with Vito, I see all of us assembled, bringing with us from our home institutions and communities a plethora of pressing problems and urgent needs. As we divide into groups to address these problems or meet in plenary sessions, Vito is a constant presence and participant. Yet, even as he joins in, there is a posture and attitude of listening. As the meeting comes to its close, Vito does what I have watched him do from one year to the next. From the intense exchanges in multiple sessions, with enviable calm and even-ness, he restates the issues raised, interweaving the many points, ideas, and plans of action brought up, and reading below the surface variety, draws the connections among them. By this act of connecting the issues at the

root, Vito also connects us to each other, setting the dialogue on a new and expanded plane, and piloting us toward the work to be done in the coming year.

Inevitably, the tasks that lie ahead are many. We self-assign to those to which we feel we can contribute. At the end of one such early meeting (1975), I count eight such working groups—several with overlapping membership, some charged with development of alternative processes for evaluating reading and the effectiveness of more informal schooling, others with educational and political advocacy for a broadened range of evaluation processes.

Will all the tasks assigned to these working groups get done? No, that isn't likely. The demands and crises of the year ahead in our many home locations will almost certainly preclude that level of perfection. Yet, though the result will not be perfect or even close to that, there will be advances and there will be a multiplying of voices and actions. The voice in which each of us speaks will be stronger and clearer, the language richer and deeper. Our individual and collective capacity to respond to what works against the well-being of children and families will be more forceful. Our advocacy for schools able to respond to the particularized needs of the surrounding community will be more focused. In other words, and returning to Myles Horton, through this time of reflecting together, of connecting with each other's issues and concerns, there has been growth—growth in ideas and in commitment to the struggle for better schools.

The political philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, in the title essay of *The Sense of Reality* (1997) writes: "What is called wisdom in statesmen ... is understanding rather than knowledge—some kind of acquaintance with relevant facts of such a kind that it enables those who have it to tell *what fits with what*" (p. 32, emphasis mine).

On first reading these words nearly a decade ago now, Vito's connecting power leapt to mind. What Berlin ascribes to the statesman is quite precisely what Vito is to be counted upon to bring to every occasion and in all circumstances: a honed ability to read below the surface of a situation or issue, or between the lines of a proposal or argument, with a discerning eye for what fits with what. When later in the same essay Berlin speaks of "a sense of timing, sensitiveness to the needs and capacities of human beings ... an element of improvisation, of playing by ear, of being able to size up a situation" (p. 33), the

picture and the fit is complete. Statesmanship and its defining wisdom, a virtually unflinching sense of reality, is an uncommon gift—but it is Vito's.

“Maintaining Better Connections with History ...”

Integral to that wisdom is Vito's unflinching respect for human-ness, his high regard for human possibility, his firm commitment to values that forward the human potential to be makers of a better world. Here I turn to history, which for Vito is a lifelong scholarly pursuit and also a vital resource for locating ourselves as educators, both intellectually and as agents for change. Time and again, in personal conversation and in public forums, I have heard Vito remind us that in order to fully grasp what confronts us in the here and now the past must be present: History must be read with discipline and purpose. As case in point, I return to Vito's important book, *Teacher With a Heart: Reflections on Leonard Covello and Community* (1998). On the very first page, Vito invokes us to be dedicated students of history and pictures for us the rich yield from availing ourselves of that resource. In his words,

Maintaining better connections with history, making it part of our ongoing reflection about teaching, learning, and schools, keeps the dignity of teaching and its broader social context within our gaze, providing us with larger sets of possibilities for our practice, leading us to a more discriminating stance about what is often put forward as reform. (p. 1)

In this regard, Vito's account of his *own* reading and re-reading of Leonard Covello's book *The Heart is the Teacher* (1958) is both a moving tribute to a fabled educator and a particularized telling of how history brought forward informs current issues and problems in education. For, as Vito asserts, Covello's book is “in many regards a contemporary story” (1998, p. 3). Set in the midst of the struggle for education and opportunity in the first half of the last century, it is also the story of immigrant populations, mostly in deteriorating city neighborhoods, living in conditions of hopelessness and poverty. Though many years have passed, the struggle of these immigrants still

speaks to us, for as Vito rightly observes, “while much has changed ... much is also the same” (1998, p. 3). Aren’t the conditions faced by immigrants now very like those confronted by immigrant populations recently arrived in this country? Aren’t homelessness, poverty, issues of language, and barriers to education pressing and urgent problems still before us, still to be effectively addressed? And isn’t it as true, as Vito reminds us, that “African Americans with a history as long in this country as the earliest European settlers, still find themselves far short of America’s promise” (p. 3), still discriminated against in the schools and in the work force?

In the context of the contemporary struggles in the schools and in the communities they relate to, Vito’s reflections on Covello’s story provide an enormous resource for those grappling now with issues of equity in the schools, of social justice, and of educational opportunity for those denied them. Because Vito tells the story of his own immigrant Italian family’s struggles side by side with Covello’s, the stories combined have doubled weight. Vito observes of the intimate bond connecting their lives: “I am easily able to find myself as one of Covello’s students, living in many of the same two worlds” (1998, p. 4). Though different in their particulars, each story echoes the other, while resonating as well with the larger immigrant experience as it has happened for so many in the past—and is happening now.

Vito speaks of his personal responses to *The Heart is the Teacher* (1958) and especially of his recent re-readings: “I am ... now more conscious of Covello’s single-mindedness about the importance of community, [a] sense of collective caring, of solidarity” (1998, p. 4). He affirms the broad current relevance of these community commitments for now: “These are particularly important matters for contemporary schools, struggling as they are with the diversity of their students and related communities, trying desperately to build among their students solid commitments to powerful learning” (p. 4).

Vito says in the preface to *Teacher With a Heart* (1998) that the high value of Covello’s life, and the reason for his own extensive reflection on that history, is that “Covello raise[s] in important ways central questions that we need to *keep* exploring” (p. x, emphasis in text). Questions of collective caring, of solidarity, of community connection are not questions confined to the past. Neither are they questions that can be answered once and for all. As Vito says, they are

large human questions giving voice to large human and abiding concerns, which in every location and circumstance require a fresh and particularized response.

Emphasizing Covello's commitment to joining the school with the community, Vito reminds us that the aims of the school must be continuous with the struggles for a more democratic society. With this nobler vision of the school, Vito directly challenges the current narrow, business-dictated conception of the school as a tool of the economy while reminding us of the unceasing efforts required to continue the struggle. Vito roots the idea of community-centered school[s] "in ... human needs, ... human aspirations, ... and the human capabilities of the individuals who comprise the community" (1998, p. 68). He calls our attention to far larger and more worthy educational aims than the current obsession with mass-produced standards and winning a testing race.

At a time when teaching is more often than not reduced to rote implementation of mandates, Vito restores its dignity and larger purpose by his affirmation, rooted in history, that teaching is "essentially a moral and intellectual endeavor" and an endeavor "emanating from the heart" (1998, p. 2). As children are increasingly and routinely pathologized and drugged to fit them to the school mold, and in ever increasing numbers "retained" because of failure to meet an arbitrary testing standard, Vito offers in rebuttal these wise and refreshing words from Covello:

Never in all my years of teaching have I said to a boy, "You can't do it." Who is there who can pretend to know the hidden capacities of another human being? I believe that more than often it is lack of faith on the part of adults which mars and even destroys the hopes of young people. (1998, p. 62)

Vito asks the reader: "How many students have we all known who chose to go beyond what anyone expected of them? Who decided at some point to do something they hadn't, for some reason, been able to do before?" (1998, p. 62). Vito answers his own questions with a story of a young man he himself taught who, against enormous odds, did just that. Vito concludes, "We just can't make judgments about what is possible for young people" (p. 63). As Vito's own teaching life

tells us, it is faith in youth, recognition of strengths, and encouragement that make the difference. These are the necessary foundations for an education enabling the student's *own* agency. In Vito's words, "Those who are fully engaged with their work see possibilities, not liabilities. They lose the language of pathology, the language of stigmatization. They have a sympathy with their students" (1998, p. 25).

Vito's words embrace the child while making the room for change and growth to happen. There is in Vito's life and work, as in Covello's, a quality of spaciousness, of confidence, of calm even as they vigorously pursue and pronounce the urgent necessity for change. It is a happy combination and one that has immeasurably benefited us all.

What Vito flatly rejects is what he famously dismisses as "tiny ideas." In that category are included whatever is simplistic and formulaic; whatever works toward sameness, conformity, and standardization; whatever substitutes ready-made solutions for the more difficult task of continued renewal of questions worth asking.

It is a measure of Vito's conviction that he persistently and insistently keeps these kinds of questions before us: What is the status of the schools and of education at this time, in this society? Who in this society at this time enjoys the full benefits of schooling and, equally, to whom are those benefits denied or curtailed? Which children and youth are given access to that knowledge which increases their options and choices? Which are excluded from this access? How well does the school connect children and youth with their rights and responsibilities as citizens of a self-proclaimed democracy? Vito in his writings, as in his life as an educator more generally, by framing these questions in the context of history, prods us to think and to act upon them now and with urgency.

As I suggested earlier in this essay, anyone who has watched Vito convene or conclude a North Dakota Study Group meeting has been favored and educated by his framing of current issues in this wider context of history and social change. Anyone reading his essays cannot but be moved by his unflinching push for an enriched educational discourse and for enlarged educational aims.

When Vito writes in the Preface to *Teacher With a Heart* (1998) and says again many times over in the body of the text, "Our schools aren't as good as they should be" (p. xi), he returns us to the struggle

Covello's book particularizes. Implied in that low key pronouncement, and in the joining Vito makes with Covello's story, is confidence that, with effort and determination, schools that aren't as good as they might be can be made better. Not perfect. Better. As Vito sets forth the task, and as Covello did before him, this is human work worth doing, strenuous work requiring the best we have to give—but working together, possible to do.

This isn't the slogan language of Failed Schools or No Child Left Behind. It is a statement of what is. This is the reality we must face: The schools aren't as good as they should be or need to be or could be. This can change. The large task before us, then, and to which Vito addresses himself in all his work with teachers, with schools, with teacher educators, and with legislators, is to take up the work of making the schools better; that is, more democratic, more responsive to children, families, and community, richer in content.

The large questions and issues to which Vito turns our attention in his *Teacher With a Heart* are as centered and balanced as his own voice and aims. Though I have heard Vito raise these questions and issues in many forums and also in personal conversations in the course of the past 30 and more years, to find them so beautifully interwoven, so whole in the text of the "reflections," imbues them with a fresh resonance. As I read Vito's reflections, I bookmarked the text liberally with slips of paper and copied over passage after memorable passage. For any reader wishing a full and rich introduction to the powerful influence Vito Perrone exerts on the thinking of our time, I highly recommend this essay as a starting place.

North Dakota

I return now briefly to North Dakota. Although Vito's mission has taken him to other locations, and his influence has spread accordingly, for me his presence is indelibly imprinted on the North Dakota landscape. There is a match for me in Vito's largeness of vision and the far-reaching prairie sky. There is his high regard for North Dakota's strong progressive political history. There is his reaching out to the Native American communities. There is his respect for the one-room schools that dotted the state (some of which remain) and the

teachers who committed themselves to teach in these isolated communities. There is the connection he steadfastly maintained throughout his tenure at the university with teachers and administrators in the Grand Forks schools. There is his long-standing dedication to rural schools and communities, enacted for many years in North Dakota and which continues now through the Annenberg Rural Challenge.

There is Vito's pride in the University of North Dakota. Under Vito's leadership, there was the collegiality and the consistency of philosophy among the Center for Teaching and Learning faculty, which I experienced first hand as a visiting professor at CTL during that Spring Semester in 1982. I cannot imagine that anyone who taught at CTL when Vito was Dean has ever forgotten the experience or has not been inspired in their own work by Vito's commitment to making the schools and the world better.

I know, too, that if each of those persons were to speak, and if all whose work has been supported by Vito and the NDSG were to add their voices, the result would be a living tribute to the rich yield from Vito's beneficent influence on education and the schools. Speaking only for myself and for Prospect, meeting Vito and the formation of the North Dakota Study Group were pivotal to what we at Prospect were able to accomplish in the course of the next decade—and far beyond.

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