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# An in-service address; the foundations of education

by Richard A. Brosio



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If one is to accept an offer to come and help conduct an in-service program, he must be confident that his potential contribution will be helpful to those who are to be serviced.<sup>1</sup> Unless one is an adviser or consultant in a highly technical field, it is not always without diffidence that one agrees to help. Education is a field, and an institutional reality, in which fierce arguments are raging. There simply is no consensus regarding what good education is in America in the last quarter of the twentieth century. There are no experts and no consensus, but we are still committed to wrestling with the most difficult questions concerning the school and the society.

In the absence of experts on profound educational questions, it may be that each teacher, and each maturing student, must develop the tools and proclivities to establish value criterion for him or herself. As Walter Lippmann wrote in *A Preface To Morals* (1929): we are beyond the time when an enduring orthodoxy is believable to large numbers of people.

Professor G. Max Wingo wrote in 1974,

"Our thesis is that American society is involved in a great transition, in which our whole way of life is being transformed. The common core of ideas and beliefs that once represented cultural solidarity is dissolving. We can no longer perceive what is constant and what is open to choice. The turmoil, therefore, that is so evident in American education is reflecting the confusion in American society."<sup>2</sup>

There are many self-appointed experts and consultants in education, who will tell anyone who may wish to listen, how to improve human relations and make the business of education run more smoothly. There are soul engineers in the world of business, the military, government and even the schools. Perhaps such people tread optimistically where others do so with greater caution, because those more diffident and fearful have wrestled with the tough existential questions confronting us all.

## II

In spite of the scorn which has been visited upon intellectuals in the twentieth century, it is the purpose of this section to sketch an honorific picture of persons who are intellectuals—persons who strive to make sense out of opaque existence.

An intellectual is not an expert on the hard questions of self, school and society in the same way that a physicist is an expert; but it is he or she who has historically led in the search for meaning in Western civilization.

Michael Novak has written, that the real task of an intellectual is to be a conscious part of what he is attempting to write or speak about.<sup>3</sup> The authentic intellectual must know what the experiences of the persons in the society are before he begins the difficult, but necessary, task of helping to articulate a description of the human condition for his own and his contemporaries' time and place. The person who comes to be honored with the descriptive adjective-intellectual-must be one who is able to speak out with pen, voice, or through cinema, theatre, etc. in such a way that his readers, listeners or viewers nod in recognition when they experience the ideas and insights being presented. An authentic intellectual person does not tell people things that they must do; he does not necessarily tell them things they don't already know. Instead, the intellectual helps a person, or people, to articulate what is already a latent feeling or recognition.

Expertise is not the same as wisdom. We are all intellectual persons when we are struggling in courageous and obstinate fashion with the profound questions which bedevil us within the human condition. An intellectual person is one who continuously works at developing the intellectual dimension of his character, but with a realization that the intellectual dimension is not co-existent with the whole rich matrix of human complexity.

We in education have too often concentrated our efforts on in-house questions—efforts which lead to short term, and sometimes specious solutions. The tougher questions do not go away. Lippmann has written,

At the heart of it there are likely to be moments of blank misgiving in which he finds that the civilization of which he is a part leaves a dusty taste in his mouth. He may be very busy with many things, but he discovers one day that he is no longer sure they are worth doing. He may be much preoccupied; but he is no longer sure he knows why . . . He finds it hard to believe that doing any one thing is better than doing nothing at all. It occurs to him that it is a great deal of trouble to live, and that even in the best of lives the thrills are few and far between.<sup>4</sup>

We are all submerged in the difficult questions facing us. This is the case because we are human and subject to the empire of time. When the Social Foundations<sup>5</sup> approach to education is done well, it is to these tough questions of the human condition that intellectual persons, who are educators, address themselves.

## III

Without having seriously grappled with the great and abiding questions which Western civilization has perennially addressed itself to, the cry for "better human relations" sounds like a pitch by an advertiser. The history

and tradition of the academic subject areas are at least a partial story of how the men and women of Western civilization have raised the abiding questions, and how they have sought to make sense out of experience. It is the position of this paper that one cannot have better human relations, in the profound and accurate sense of the term, if shortcuts are attempted which seek to pretend that the perennial concerns are not worthy of attention.

One knows his or her own history in comparative terms; consequently, one must know a great deal about the human condition itself in order to authentically and successfully deal with contemporary and individual problems. The educated person with whom one can have better human relations is not merely a dot upon a cold white surface—he is not an atom which is incapable of understanding and having empathy for another; he is instead, a person enmeshed in and heir to a complex inheritance which is made up of genetics, race, ethnicity, class, religion, etc. One is capable of real dialogue if he is profoundly grounded in the knowledge of his own history. One's knowledge of self is always worked through and is had within the rich mosaic of the history of the species. When a person knows himself in this manner, then he can empathize with a partner in dialogue; and **this** is the crucial factor in the process which can lead to the betterment of human relations.

The school must be a place where young persons are taught about the historic task of manipulating—from a hominocentric point of view—the stuff of a universe which may be benignly indifferent to human purpose. The various academic disciplines must be seen, as they were in fact historically developed, as a specialized assault upon chaos. Intelligent action is possible when men and women have become familiar with the disciplines, and have learned to act cooperatively within a democratic community of shared meaning.

## IV

Objective certainty is not believed to be easily had in the twentieth century. The series of revolutionary changes which have occurred in the Western world since the acme of medieval civilization in the thirteenth century have caused men and women to experience a splintering of perception itself. A lack of consensus has plagued Western civilization in the modern period. It becomes increasingly difficult to find *terra firma* upon which to base objectivity. We live in an age marked by the fact that orthodoxy is a state which is possible for only a few. There are, as we have seen, certain narrowly defined areas in which expertise and instrumental certainty is perhaps fleetingly possible. A modicum of objectivity and warranted assertibility can be gained, but when the ethical and ontological questions are raised, then the situation becomes more difficult.

Albert Camus has written, that although the world we experience seems to have no ultimate meaning, men shall go on giving meaning to things and events as long as we remain human.

I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has a meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one. The world has at least the truth of man . . .<sup>6</sup>

Although there are no experts and no certainty, we are not without ballast. There exists, within the West, a

verbal, musical, literary, conceptual tradition which can be discerned and studied. The record of this history is sometimes confusing because there have been disagreements and even wars over various and opposing interpretations of the tradition. In spite of this confusion, which is inherently part of the tradition, the record contains within it a distinguishable thin red line of consistent achievement. The thin red line has been based upon the assumption (perhaps not "provable") that human life is precious—that it is sacrosanct. The thin red line of agreement which we seek to describe is based upon the assumption that suffering is not inevitable—that suffering is bad. Furthermore, the agreement has included within it the corollary assumption, viz., that man should be able to maximize his potential during his time on earth.

The thin red line of agreement which we seek to describe is not easily explainable. The reader is invited to think through his or her own recollection of history so that the necessarily brief description herein can be supplemented. The thin thread of consistent human insistence upon the condemnation of suffering and savagery can be called man's quest for dignity. When human beings have temporarily stemmed the chaos inherent in suffering, ignorance and death, they have described that temporary state as being dignified. Dignity is a word which has been used to describe how man and women would like to be treated. When one achieves temporary harmony and clarity *vis-a-vis* the opaqueness of existence, then Western man has thought of himself to be dignified.

For the sake of clarity, let us assume that there have been different and classifiable emphases upon the historic quest for dignity in the West. For purposes of this analysis, we shall consider five facets or emphases in man's quest for dignity: (a) religious, (b) philosophic, (c) political, (d) economic and (e) psychological.

It can be said that Western man sought religious dignity when he defined his creator in anthropomorphic terms. The Judeo-Christian God has been said to intervene in man's history and has promised salvation. Closely related to man's demand for religious dignity, has been the quest for philosophic dignity. Plato spoke of the existence of eternal and universal forms of which men could partake, understand and share. There existed a realm of unalterable truth for the classical Greeks, and man's reason allowed him to share in that truth. If man's soul was thought to be capable of allowing him to conquer the empire of time, then the fourth and fifth century B.C. Greek contribution was a belief that man could share in the eternal through his reason.

We have seen a drive toward political dignity in the attempt of Western man to build political institutions which allow participation by more and more people. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the whole problem of modern democracy, and/or the lack of it—but the fact is that almost no modern government can claim legitimacy without appealing to support of, and participation by, most of the citizens within its borders. There is a tradition within the West which has refused to settle for a definition of the good life which does not include participatory democracy as an integral part.

Since the time of Karl Marx, we have heard the cry which reminds us that while man does not live by bread alone, political, philosophical and religious dignity can be empty slogans without economic dignity and well-being. It could be argued that our own century can be charac-

terized by man's determination to secure economic dignity for himself and his progeny.

Our own century has also seen the quest for dignity translated into psychological terms. Since the time of Freud, we have been especially aware of the need for man to be free from psychological distress. We have come to realize that there can be no political democracy worthy of the name, if there are no democrats. It is more clearly recognized now, that religious and philosophic constructs can be more helpful if they are built by persons who enjoy mental health.

The ballast, anchor or thin red line is integrally related to man's insistence upon asking normative questions of whatever *status quo* he happens to live within. Herbert Marcuse<sup>7</sup> explains that Western man has refused to accept the legitimacy of *what is*; on the contrary, he is contrasting *is* with *ought*. There is a tradition which has refused to accept the legitimacy of the unrationalized *status quo*, and that refusal has been stated in the name of man's historical search for dignity. Men, using their own philosophical or religious ballast, fortified by historical memory and community support, have always asked normative questions of a status quo which they considered to be harmful to the well-being of the human beings—harmful to the possibility for better human relations.

As Marcuse and others have explained, the realm of *ought* has not simply been conjured up out of thin air, moreover it was not given from on high; instead, it has been, and continues to be fashioned out of the experience and imagination of men and women who have asked themselves the perennial questions we have been analyzing in this paper. The *ought* is hammered out of our personal history, when the individual chapter is understood as part of the larger story of human condition. Perhaps the normative *ought* can never be fully realized; nevertheless, it is a constant goad to all of us who are tempted to accept the injustice which is inherent in the human condition.

Education is the focal point of the human species' attack upon the inherent injustice which results from living within a world which was not made specifically for us. Education means the fashioning of tools which allow us to re-arrange the furniture of our existence. Better human relations, if they are not to be merely a slogan, can be aspired to by men and women who ask and work through the perennial questions—who construct grids and attempt to anchor them to the thin red line of the human attempt to live a dignified existence within a democratic community.

#### Footnotes

1. This writer is opposed to the term and concept—"serviced." Paul Goodman has articulated my dislike of the term "personnel" in his book, *People or Personnel* (1963). People or persons are better terms than personnel. Perhaps the reader can think of a better concept/word than "serviced?"
2. G. Max Wingo, *Philosophies of Education: An Introduction* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath & Company, 1974), p. 3.
3. Michael Novak, *The Rise Of The Unmeltable Ethnics* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, Co., Inc., 1971), Chapter Six.
4. Walter Lippmann, *A Preface To Morals* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1929), p. 4.
5. The social foundations approach to education attempts to place the school into the focus of what is occurring in the larger society. Questions of *ought* are raised—a normative dimension is used to analyze and criticize the descriptive *is*, or what might be called the *status quo*. Traditionally the social foundations of education have used philosophical, historical and sociological tools.
6. Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion And Death* (New York: The Modern Library, 1960), p. 22.
7. *Vide, passim*: Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).