

## A BRIEF STATEMENT ABOUT TEACHING



*Religion*

Kristina 2/2000

I recently received a letter of introduction from the executive director of a group out of Seattle called the Ernest Becker Foundation. The anthropologist Ernest Becker was a brilliant educator and author, a man who was emphatic throughout his brief life concerning the importance of interdisciplinary and incorporative approaches to learning. He was also an extraordinary native psychologist who understood the place of anxiety in human experience, approaching his themes with a “truth-taking stare” that seems a veritable hallmark of greatness. And, so, I was not surprised to see amid the foundation’s offerings a lecture entitled *Education by Anxiety: Becker and Kierkegaard*. Indeed, for the 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (a formidable influence on Becker), learning and anxiety were inseparable. Anxiety is both school and teacher, Kierkegaard proclaimed, and the individual not educated in “the school of anxiety” has not properly learned.

Although many may hesitate at linking the pursuit of knowledge with any sort of disconcerting turbulence given our progressive American sensibilities, the point rings true in intriguing ways. Students of psychology and counseling who do not experience some measure of agitation as they are being introduced to theory upon theory may be already at risk, for such students are likely to become externally-determined in the main, whereas self-becoming (in its deeper and more nuanced aspects) is the very antithesis of over-reliance on external shibboleths. Equally apparent, anxiety is by no means thereby overcome but rather circumvented so that it operates in covert ways, curtailing imagination and defining, ultimately, an inability to reflect, wonder and engage. As a consequence, we have in effect carbon cutouts—automatons, theoretical women or men who will obey all the rules without thinking too much, safe but insipid technicians. The psychoanalyst and existential-humanist writer Rollo May once remarked that at the termination of therapy a client ought leave the consulting room more anxious than when she or he arrived. Though this flies in the face of almost all that we typically hear, it is very much in keeping with the spirit of Kierkegaard (who defined anxiety as the “dizziness of freedom”) and also with what we observe about the rarity of substantive change.

I do not imply by any of this the negation of passion or joy or endorse any sort of pessimism. Quite the opposite! What we are getting at is not simply the anxiety that a student feels (that we all, indeed, feel) about the burden of responsibility for fashioning something respectable, even noble, out of her or his life but, further, the anticipatory exhilaration that propels the student forward: the joys inherent in discovery and encounter. Read any one the three writers I have mentioned above (each a fine psychologist in the end, whether officially located in our professional fold or not) and a discerning mind cannot help but be moved by the sheer magnanimity of the spirit and quest. With luck, it will jump a gap between the written page of those who are read and perhaps no longer with us and receptive minds very much among the living. The true teacher is akin to the Zen master who points to the moon; it is imperative that students be turned on to the larger images and pictures without getting stuck on the master's finger. The skillful teacher, like the wise psychotherapist, is an intermediary figure who remains attentive to her or his dignified, transitional role.

The educator's position, then, ought to be akin to that of the well-informed yet ever-curious midwife or guide. We are neither carriers of encyclopedic knowledge whose function it is to blithely deposit that knowledge upon perfectly obedient acolyte minds nor adepts whose authority will remain forever the benchmark by which the aspirants are judged. We are rather like temporary guides and accompanists whose charge it is to catalyze in our students the joys that inhere in both inward and outward exploration and discovery. "One repays one's teacher poorly if one remains forever a student," admonished Nietzsche's fictional mouthpiece Zarathustra; "You have found me, now go and find yourselves."

While recently perusing an essay on jazz legend John Coltrane (whose curiosity was as prodigious as his genius and essential largesse and whose music often evolved at meteoric speed from recording to recording during the course, sadly, of another foreshortened life), I pondered this passage from Tolstoy's essay on art:

In order to influence people, the artist must be constantly searching, so that his work is a quest. If he has discovered everything and knows everything and instructs people or deliberately sets out to entertain them, he has no influence on them. Only when he is searching for the way forward do the spectator and the listener become one with him in his quest.

The South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim (very much involved with education in his native land with music at the forefront of the curricular hegemony) speaks in this sense of a word that is found in the jazz world (a world with a language and angle on reality very much its own): *trance-mission*. Do you see? Consciousness that jumps a gap, from Ellington to Ibrahim and from there, perhaps, to us. Ibrahim proposes jazz itself as a model of ethics and community for the twenty-first century. Judging by the astonishing "dialogues" and "conversations" one witnesses routinely in jazz (some of the most moving displays of reverence and learning, imagination and pathos, tradition and newness imaginable) and comparing these to much that we observe in more prosaic realms, the point, to say the least, is instructive.

And, so, our meditation takes on (fittingly here in New England) even transcendentalist overtones with this talk of trance and influence of self, other and beyond with the educator as intermediary or conduit or pointer. I think here about Elaine Pagels's psychologically refined exegeses of

the so-called “Gnostic gospels” (those geared at Tolstoyan freethinkers and, hence, not necessarily to be found amid more doctrinaire liturgies):

If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you.  
If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth  
will destroy you.

*The Gospel of Thomas*

Bring in your guide and your teacher. The mind is the guide, but  
reason is the teacher . . . Live according to your mind . . . Acquire  
strength, for the mind is strong . . . Enlighten your mind . . . Light the  
lamp within you.

*The Teachings of Silvanus*

The educator’s task is to prompt the student toward the “discovery of being” and the joys of earnest inquiry, and the proper methodology is most certainly the development of one’s own self. Those handful of teachers who influence us most profoundly are the ones who themselves embody qualities of openness and reach and generosity, thereby manifesting qualities and presences often lacking in commoner displays of disembodied erudition and knowledge. The educator is one who functions by unselfconscious example, thereby becoming a catalyst to the pursuit of that of which the student is capable.

There is a story out of India (where Brahman is the Creator of the Universe, Vishnu the Sustainer, and Shiva the Destroyer) about a man who worshipped only the god Shiva while mocking all other deities. One day Shiva himself appeared before the man and said, “I shall never be pleased with you so long as you hate others.” The man, however, was tenacious in his monotheism. Again the god appeared, once more the man demurred. A third time Shiva came, this time half as Shiva and half as Vishnu. Half pleased and half displeased, the man equivocated only briefly before turning to one side and offering his customary prayer to the god Shiva. At this point, Shiva gave up, saying, “This man’s bigotry is incorrigible.”

Like the ancient god (here the destroyer of self-assured smugness and the allure of false certainty), it is the teacher’s design to quicken the student’s awakening to passionate inquiry and what Rollo May liked to call the “joy of thinking”; “It’s great fun,” he once quipped, “if you know how to do it.” Let us conclude with a final line out of Nietzsche:

Step out of your cave: the world awaits you like a garden . . . All things  
want to be your physicians!

Such mindful “doctoring,” in a very real sense, is what the work of teaching (and counseling, too, for that matter) at its very best is all about.

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