An in-service address; the foundations of education

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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. Unless one is an adviser or consultant in a highly technical field, it is not always without difficulty 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 propensities to establish value criteria for himself 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.”

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.
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. 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 blink-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.

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' approach to education is done well, it is to these tough questions of the human condition that intellectual persons, who are educators, address themselves.

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 immersed 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 homocentric 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.

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 feebly possible. A modicum of objectivity and warranted asseribility 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 the man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one. The world has at least the truth of man. *

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, this record con-
tains 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 supple-
mented. The thin thread of consistent human in-
sistence 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 tem-
porary 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 in-
tervene 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 at-
tempt 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 democracies. 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 explains that Western man has refused to accept
the legitimacy of what is; on the contrary, he is con-
trasting it with ought. There is a tradition which has
refused to accept the legitimacy of the unreason"alized
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 norm-
ative questions of a status quo which they considered to be
harmful to the well-being of the human beings—harm-
ful 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 them-
selves 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 nor-
mative ought can never be fully realized; nevertheless, it is
a constant goal to all of us who are tempted to accept the
injustices which are inherent in the human condition.

Education is the focal point of the human species' at-
tack 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—which construct grids and at-
tempt to anchor them to the thin red line of the human at-
tempt 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 "person-
nel" in his book, People or Personnel (1963). People or per-
sons are better terms than personnel. Perhaps the reader can
think a better concept/word than "serviced?"
2. G. Max Wingo, Philosophies of Education: An Introduction
3. Michael Novak, The Rise Of The Unthinkable Ethics (New York:
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 critique the consequences, 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
7. Vires, paflimb: Herbert Marcuse, One Dimensional Man (Boston: