

Out of and Into the Cave: My Philosophy of Education

In the process of putting so much pressure on language, thought ceases to be satisfied with the support of words; it bursts away from them in order to seek its resolution elsewhere. This "elsewhere" should not be understood as a transcendent realm, a mysterious metaphysical domain. This "elsewhere" is "here" in the immediacy of real life. It is from right here that our thoughts rise up, and it is here that they must come back. But after what travel! Live first; then turn to philosophy; but, in the third place, live again. The man in Plato's cave has to go out and contemplate the light of the sun; then, strengthened by this light, which he keeps in his memory, he has to return to the cave. Verbal philosophy is only a necessary stage in this voyage.

René Daumal, *Mount Analog*

The word "education" derives from etymological roots meaning "to lead out," not "to lead to." Its place and purpose is to initiate—by means of "verbal" philosophy, intellectual journey—even if they seem to be prodigal—in the hope that they will prove to be, like the original Odyssey, round trips, perhaps even vision quests. Education must never be merely the delivery-system for ready-made cultural answers; it must be the radical (in its literal meaning of "going to the root") *asking* of questions (questions being—as Heidegger observed the real "piety of thinking") and the means of learning, for lifetime use, the art of questioning. Education—if may be allowed one more etymological probe—should then be essentially "seminar": it should be a sowing of seeds. The great failure of education in our day can be attributed in large part to the decline of its *seminal* importance.

I have long sought (and even dreamed of finding, or perhaps helping to create) a university setting in which teaching might become truly seminal, directed toward wisdom and not merely knowledge and not what it seems to often to be now: the treatment of learning as if the human mind were merely an infinitely complex roll-top desk, satisfied by the proper, precise stuffing of its pigeon-holes (a process known in the trade as classification and analysis). The Cartesian dream—still education's driving fantasy—of clear and indubitable ideas may have secured for humankind that knowledge which now yields power, but it has sown few if any seeds,

inspired little if any wisdom; and it has not provided the young with a grasp of the living unity of the world. Nor can it inspire true vision quests.

It is, indeed, fortunate, as R. Buckminster Fuller once noted in a poem, that nature does not “have/Separate departments of/Mathematics, physics,/Chemistry, biology,/History and languages./Which would require/Department head meetings/To decide what to do/Whenever a boy [throws]/A stone in the water/With the complex of consequences/Crossing all departmental lines.” But the normal curriculum of the American university seems oblivious to this central fact: that the world (both human and natural) is a whole, united beyond all human attempts to compartmentalize, or departmentalize, it. Because Fuller’s insight has long informed all my own research and teaching, I view education as primarily a synthesizing process which must serve, especially in this divisive age, as perhaps the most seminal means available within a culture for the transformation of a divided world. But education must unite more than just the disciplines.

Paul Goodman once suggested that the real task of anthropology is “to show what of human nature has been ‘lost’ and, practically, to devise experiments for its recovery.” We might similarly define the task of a synthetic education. For in its questioning of the traditional order of knowledge, its linking up of past and present, its cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary perspective (for synthetic education should be all of these) it seeks to guide the student “beyond culture,” an absolute necessity, as Edward T. Hall has shown, in an age in which the clash of cultures exhumes all those hidden assumptions, often grounded in habitual ignorance, which serve as the underpinnings of what we believe to be reality, depositing them where we can no longer ignore them, on the stage of history. A synthetic education, aiding time in its pursuit of its own tail through the integration of past and present world-views, facilitating the development of a planetary culture by generating minds capable of sorting the wheat from the chaff in the midst of cultural pluralism, can be a primary means for overcoming the potentially lethal ethnocentrism which now threatens our aspirations to unity.

When you learn something, G. B. Shaw once quipped, it always feels at first like you’ve lost something. To truly learn, then, a student must not be afraid of loss, and will not be if the guides seem trustworthy and experienced. A teacher must know the routes—all of them, even the ones not explored on his or her own journey into the interior—and a teacher must know more than the map and the territory (the curriculum and the world, respectively) and why they are not identical; a teacher

must remember, too, what it was like *not* to know the way about; a teacher must teach exploring, whether mountaineering or spelunking, as if it were to have no end and as if each step along the path were the whole journey itself present in a pedagogical equivalent of the *nunc stans*, the standing now, remembering all the while that, as Loren Eiseley says, teachers are always “sculptors in snow,” and should be, lest they become Gradgrinds.

Teachers teach best when they must teach—of that I am convinced—when teaching is a natural outgrowth or overflow (spontaneous or otherwise) of the interests, enthusiasm, and passion of the teacher’s whole being, when teaching is instrumental to his unity and as well a progress report on an odyssey. I wonder if it is not true that teachers actually teach only themselves; I wonder if students do not, in fact, learn best when they find the mind that confronts them in that particular arena of life known as a classroom worthy of mimicry. I wonder if all learning is not emulation. The true function of a poet. Wallace Stevens argued, is to make his imagination the reader’s imagination. Similarly, a teacher teaches imagination—his or her methods, questions, mind, but not his or her answers.

Only in this way can a student be brought out of the cave; only in this way can he be properly prepared for return.