

Prefatory Note: This piece was written in March 1974 and published in Profiles, Vol. 6, No. 4, University of Montana, May 1974.

Education and the Style of our Lives

Sensitive to the climate of the times and to a fresh initiative provided by the new state constitution, our legislature has authorized comprehensive reviews of formal education in Montana. Accordingly, the Board of Public Education has focused on "basic quality education" as requiring fresh interpretation and implementation for our primary and secondary public schools. And the appointed Commission on Post-Secondary Education, or 'Blue Ribbon Commission', is reviewing all post-secondary education in the state, taking into account previous studies along the same lines. The Board has held numerous hearings around the state and in February it presented An Interim Report to the legislature. The report is available to the public and response to it is solicited by the Board. Through hearings and published digests of its work in progress the Commission is also attempting to elicit the maximum participation of people concerned in the fulfillment of the charge placed upon it.

We are invited, then, to listen and to speak out in what amounts to an unprecedented statewide forum on education and to share more fully in the responsibility for the educational opportunities to be afforded in Montana.

Article X, Section I of the 1972 Montana Constitution states: "It is the goal of the people to establish a system of education which will develop the full educational potential of each person. Equality of educational opportunity is guaranteed to each person of the state." The extent and the kinds of educational opportunity to be guaranteed each person would seem to dovetail with how that person's educational potential takes on definition and receives both recognition and encouragement.

In grades 1-12 the system of education exerts its most widespread and destinate influence on the educational potential of each person early in life. Subsequent attitudes toward formal education and estimates of the opportunities it may extend to a person beyond the high school years are apt to be pretty decisively

based on experience in the schools. While it probably requires little stretch of the imagination to grasp the import of post-secondary opportunities in professional and 'vocational-technical' training, other post-secondary opportunities are likely to hold forth a more vague prospect relative to the school experience. The more that experience has stretched mentality and vitalized imagination, however, drawing forth the authentic response of a young person, so that studies after all have not been like doing time, the more open that person is likely to be to a fuller range of educational opportunities beyond the high school years. But no deep and continuing development of a person's educational potential is possible except as the person is willing to venture and to risk himself. No liberating education takes place without entailing self-risk, as in trying to articulate what one may really feel and think as one is responding to things studied and meeting criticism. To become a free participating citizen in an educational institution, and to experience one's part in the life of that institution as real life, nothing can substitute for venturing oneself in the work carried on, and that holds good no less for teachers and administrators than it does for students. Indeed without the decisive initiative of the former in this respect not only will they lack genuine authority, but the students will suffer by want of that atmosphere of sponsorship necessary if they are to be encouraged to risk themselves in the work. To the extent that they may then come to speak their hearts and minds and bear the consequences of doing so, they will tend to grope for the occasions appropriate to their doing so outside the context of formal education; that context can hardly seem to them 'where it's at'; or they will struggle to convert formal education into 'life experiences' in a futile effort to substitute for authentic study and disciplined response in which teachers and students lay themselves on the line and level with one another in their work.

Basically, life and the lived world are substantive for thoughtful and

imaginative inquiry and exploration in formal education. The possibilities of meaning in life and the lived world become a matter of deliberate concern and demand a sustained effort of articulate realization on the part of any participant whose educational potential is to be lastingly engaged. A certain distance on life's drift and struggles--in parallel with one's immersion in them--is requisite to these tasks of study, inquiry, articulation, and thoughtful judgment. Respect for people and their own lives furthermore ordains that formal education not presume to merge and collapse that distance, subjecting people and their experience to an experimental control, to a tampering with their lives. And if development of one's own educational potential is proffered to a person as an invitation to exercise experimental control over oneself and 'one's own experiences', then that confusion is sustained only to the radical detriment of educational potential. No one ever is himself or responds authentically in his situation in occupying the stance of a chooser and a consumer of 'experiences'. From such a stance 'self-identity' is bound to become a quandary and all too likely a quagmire of self-preoccupation.

It is the wealth of imagination, of sensitivity, and of reflective judgment patiently developed and brought into life situations which can make of one's participation in these situations experience in a significant sense. Only in function of that 'wealth', which it is the basic business of formal education to foster, can life situations themselves become truly educative in turn and continually contributory to the development of the person's educational potential. Experience in the significant sense is a life from which one is able and willing to learn, in which one makes oneself responsible for the meaning of what is going on, and remains open to help in doing so. Evocation of responsibility for meaning and discipline in interpreting meaning--that is the heart and substance of education's liberating work in relation with lived life. Acquisition of information and development of skills become mechanical and vacuous in so far as they are carried out in default

of that liberating work. Nor are countless hours of televiewing likely to galvanize sustained response in coming to grips with a world that--as TV presents it in composite--may hardly appear livable.

The matter under discussion seems as elusive as it is fundamental. 'Liberal', or liberating education has always been an elusive theme. Yet the theme is at issue in the most humble elements of formal education. What is it to learn to read, to write, to listen, to speak, to perceive sensitively and noticingly, to grow beyond the provinciality of one's immediate circumstance and time, to find one's way in entertaining possibilities and drawing inferences? It is nothing if it is not at the same time an enhancement of imagination and of resourcefulness and of critical capacity in assuming responsibility for meaning in the myriad modes of meaning which impart potential to human life. But the sense of responsibility for meaning is the key to the development of the educational potential of the person; and this is evoked. The power to evoke it must be at least latent in the things studied. At the same time the mediation of the teacher can for a long time be essential, but it can only be effectively so in so far as a teacher is himself one who has become a student for life; that is, a person for whom responsibility for meaning--in whatever field of appreciation or learning--has become a central vocation and commitment. For only those vocationally committed in that sense can evoke a kindred sense of responsibility in direct relationship with the student. Here again the matter goes deeper than skill, proficiency, competence on the part of the teacher. Simply put, it is a matter of the teacher's dedication in an inquiring spirit to what is studied and to the students. In both respects this dedication must be keyed to the potential in question: the potential of meaning to be realized in what is studied, and the potential assumption of responsibility for that meaning on the part of the student. Only faith in both can sustain the work of teacher and student in frankness and in hope.

In a special sense a teacher should have occasion to appreciate the force of Paul's words (Romans, 5: 3-5): "that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed;" hence the courage to risk oneself, alluded to earlier on. Without that, who, in point of understanding, can pass from child to human maturity, and to a life not abandoned within the confines of a ready-made mould?

Perhaps it is not so much the uncertainties of their future or the complexities and the rate of change in our technological-industrial scheme that contribute to the deepest disturbance with young people these days. Far more deeply troubling is the threat of vacuousness and inauthenticity which seems to haunt our world. Often in desperation the younger simply react--rejecting forms of life and institutions which strike them as redolent of ready-made moulds; and they strike out against those who seem to them to personify 'a sell-out'. But more deeply, are they not invaded by the suspicion of being implicated themselves, more surely than they would choose to be, in the condition that disturbs them? After all, mere reaction, rejection, and protest not only fall short of coming to terms with that condition--they tend to remain parasitically tributary to it. This is betrayed in the proliferation of 'counter-moulds'--right down to mannerisms of speech and other 'orthodoxies' of a 'new life-style'. The readiness with which the expression, 'life-style', has itself caught on is not without pathos and irony. The pathos lies in the fact that style may indeed be in question; but the irony lies in what happens to our style of life in so far as we tacitly assume that it reduces to options available to choice, over which the person may exercise autonomous control. That assumption tacitly reproduces at the level of an unexamined attitude the very style of life underlying the inauthenticity and the vacuousness manifest in those forms of life which are objected to. One's actual style is not put on--whatever it may be that one can put on--or off--at will. It is unobtrusively formed in the

way one takes up with things and not explicit to consciousness as something taken up with and susceptible to imposition on oneself. Perhaps the deepest tragedy of our era is the implicit interpretation of power in terms of an attempted exertion of power of control over . . . even over our lives and our very selves. It is a deadly and a deathly rendering of power, from which one consigns oneself to the life of a fugitive, devoured by time. The more one runs the more surely he is caught. Is it more honest to be idle, then, passing time? Or is it that in idling one would then be at a standstill, just stumped? One will not make a pretense--well and good. But then what? And what makes for pretension? Does it yield to being ruled out of order? Has one the power to banish it? Or does one have to come off it? To lay oneself on the line, as it were. . . .

These thoughts may be at best sketchily suggestive of some of the ambiguities of contemporary life which underly the educational situation and qualify it as critical. They have taken on an intensity which makes for extraordinary tension among those not yet inured to them. One finds with students who show up at the college level that the system of education does not seem to have addressed many of them so as to collaborate in a release from that tension. In relation to their educational potential--what that might be--the work of discovering and encouraging it remains largely to be done. More and more it becomes apparent that the work of liberating education cannot be done en masse, that there can be no effective substitute for direct, one-to-one, work between a teacher and each student for whom that teacher is responsible, whatever other forms their work together may take. If the student is to be liberated in point of educational potential, that person must be listened to with earnest and discerning attention--directly. Without that, criticism of the students' work is likely to miss what lies behind the way in which the work is being done; and the mutual trust necessary to deep candor is not likely to come about. Evocation of mutual trust and responsibility for what is at issue

in study require this direct relationship, given the climate of our times. It is not that students need to be confirmed that they are OK, just as they are. Not at all. But they do need to be accepted in the humility, the patience, and the hope requisite to their relaxation in trust.

Largely for lack of a deeply liberating education during antecedent years, the first year of college is more often than not either a default or it is a matter of arousing and reclaiming for life the educational potential of the person. One may rejoice indeed if our friend Lazarus begins to stir.

To read, to write, to articulate and examine what is really felt and thought, to be clear on logical commitments, yes, and to really listen--and to bring live imagination and inquiring spirit to these tasks--all these have to be begun all over again and afresh. Often enough this novitiate, too, seems to fall under a lifeless pall, and the stuff of which we are made is again placed on trial.

More particularly, tutelage is necessary in the living significance of the seemingly dead past, which it is characteristic of our times either to ignore as simply superceded or to take up with it in killing fashion. As might be expected, it is little suspected by a present which passively assumes its historicity rather than appropriating it in an active and searching manner, that much of the uniform vacuity of the present reflects this need of an 'appropriation' of that very past left languishing in oblivion. Faculties have the largest share in the responsibility for this radical neglect of educational potential. Only in so far as they are willing to discover themselves as students all over again will they accept their own human and personal novitiate under the tutelage of our predecessors. For the latter cannot speak to us for as long as we approach them as the butt of pronouncements we lay upon them; we 'the authorities', speaking from a privileged position. Whether such pronouncement carries a commendatory or condemnatory tone--it stills the voices which might yet speak to us were we to listen to them with

earnest attention. Listening to the dead and to the living is much the same. To heed the latter properly turns out to be surprisingly linked with heeding the former, from whom literacy, too, is derived in any depth. Time itself becomes emptied of density and depth except as we actively inherit our place within the generations of mankind. So emptied, it spawns a rootless and sterile future projected from the tongues of men in mere talk--however authoritatively imposing or emotionally choked that talk may be. And there should be no illusion on this point: Action speaks to the same effect as words. If speech remains flat, wooden, cliché-ridden and captive to the jargon of the day, actions will faithfully articulate and extend the same stranded state of affairs. But whatever the human spirit may do, it can only come to know itself in the doing through becoming articulate in speech. Without that neither self nor world can become decisively real. But it follows from the times that this is not readily believed.

The fundamental task of education is to assist, to collaborate, in bringing to pass the conversancy of the person and the world in their mutuality. This is even more fundamentally a task of placement within the fullness of historical time--so that it may become the time of our lives--than it is one of adjustment simply in contemporaneous relationship to the things around us. For the reach of time alone can fund the meaning of these things and endow our lives with a purposefulness in which we embrace things with respect. That too is the way of self-respect, in so far as it comes to pass. Only if the past comes alive in us do we have a future which can own us. That seems to be the hardest thing for present-and-future-oriented America to grasp.

A review of our educational system in Montana may yield a few suggestions if these reflections can have any bearing on it:

(1) Genuine liberal education must be conceived as the most fundamental and continuous commitment we owe to people, and it must be met from the ground up.

This cannot be done, in spite of even the best will in the world, by teachers who are loaded with responsibility for too many students and preparations. A reduction of this load is an absolutely necessary condition of our not travesty the educational potential of young people during the years of their required attendance at school. Perhaps the most critical years in this connection are the high school years. It seems a fact that even the most gifted and dedicated teachers at this level can hardly escape being ground down and numbed under the excessive loads they are presently attempting to carry--especially in the larger schools. The threat of futility is above all demoralizing, with perfunctoriness and bureaucracy ever on its heels.

(2) The responsibility for preparing and certifying the most able, fully and deeply educated as teachers for the schools must be assumed as one of the most urgent and critical tasks of a university faculty as a whole. Whatever the school teacher teaches, that teacher should be a deeply and broadly educated person, in whom an inquiring spirit and concern for young people in their potential are living strong. The spirit in question cannot be fabricated. Responsibility for it in the schools lies in the first instance with those responsible in the development of the educational potential of the teachers in the schools.

(3) The development of collegueship between teachers at the post-secondary level with those working at the antecedent levels should fill the yawning gaps now obtaining between them. Collaboration on the continuous development of the educational potential of persons in this state seems to have been minimal.

(4) Neither professional nor vocational programs should preempt the fundamental place of liberal education at any level. And to the full the mentality and the spirit of the latter should enter into the conduct of those very programs; in which case they too may serve the educational potential of persons both root and branch.

But at present liberal education still languishes in this state--at every level and in point of recognition as our basic educational need. We are used to looking away to 'goals' rather than examining thoughtfully what most nearly and elusively implicates us, qualifying the very style of our lives.