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Teaching as Possibility: A Light in Dark Times

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Borrowing from a bitter poem by Bertolt Brecht, Hannah Arendt entitled a book of essays, *Men in Dark Times* (1968). The poem, "To Posterity," she explained, spoke of the horrors taking place in the early days of Nazi rule in Germany and of the absence of outrage. Things were covered up, she wrote, by "highly efficient talk and double talk;" and she stressed how important it always is to have a space in which light can be shed on what is happening and what is being said. Granted, our times may not be marked by the kinds of monstrosities associated with the Nazis; but dark times are no rarity, even in American history. In the darkest moments, she wrote, we still "have the right to expect some illumination ...and such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under all circumstances..." (p. ix). I view our times as shadowed by violations and erosions taking place around us: the harm being done to children; the eating away of social support systems; the "savage inequalities" in our schools; the spread of violence; the intergroup hatreds; the power of media; the undermining of arts in the lives of the young. And then I think of the "light that some men and women will kindle under almost all circumstances," and that makes me ponder (and sometimes wonder at) the work that is and might be done by teachers at this problematic moment in our history.

There is doubt, unquestionably, within and outside the schools; and there is dread. The poet Adrienne Rich has written some remarkable poetry about the different kinds of dread experienced by different people. When asked how, in the face of this, she could maintain such an affirmative attitude, she said, "If poetry is forced by the conditions in which it is created to speak of dread and of bitter, bitter conditions, by its very nature, poetry speaks to something different. That's why poetry can bring together those parts of us which exist in dread and those which have the surviving sense of a possible happiness, collectivity, community, a loss of isolation" (Moyers, 1995, p. 342).

Arendt and Rich, each in her distinctive voice, are speaking of the capacity of human beings to reach beyond themselves to what they believe should be,

might be in some space they bring into being among and between themselves. The two remind us (by speaking of an uncertain light and of something different) of what it signifies to imagine not what is necessarily probable or predictable, but what may be conceived as possible. All of those who have parented children or taught the young may resonate to this on some level, particularly when they recall the diverse, often unexpected shapes of children's growing and becoming. Many may find a truth in Emily Dickinson's saying that "The Possible's slow fuse is lit/ By the Imagination" (1960, pp. 688-689). Imagination, after all, allows people to think of things as if they could be otherwise; it is the capacity that allows a looking through the windows of the actual towards alternative realities.

It is obvious enough that arguments for the values and possibilities of teaching acts (no matter how enlightened) within the presently existing system cannot be expressed through poetry, even as it is clear that the notion of "teaching as possibility" cannot simply be asserted and left to do persuasive work. The contexts have to be held in mind, as does what strikes many of us as a backward leaning, inhumane tendency in our society today. For all the apparent resurgence of Deweyan progressive thinking in the school renewal movement, parent bodies and community representatives in many places are explicitly at odds with what they believe is being proposed. They respond more readily to the media-sustained talk of standards and technology than they do to the idea of multiple patterns of being and knowing, to a regard for cultural differences, to an attentiveness when it comes to voices never listened to before.

Teachers who are consciously and reflectively choosing themselves as participants in school renewal are being challenged to clarify their beliefs and (more and more often) to defend their practices. If the discourse they are developing can be infused with the kinds of metaphor that reorient ordinary common-sense thinking, if they can break through more often what John Dewey called "the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness" (1954, p. 183) when attention is turned to the school, neighborhood or district discussions may be moved beyond the customary and the self-regarding. If the fears and suffering of local people, some of them feeling themselves to be ignorant and powerless, can be taken into account, what Paulo Freire called a "pedagogy of hope" might even take form (1995), and dialogue of a different sort might take the place of the language of prescription or complaint or demand. If teachers can begin to think of themselves as among those able to kindle the light Arendt described or among those willing to confront the dread and keep alive the sense of "a possible happiness," they might find themselves revisioning their life projects, existing proactively in the world.

Paying heed to the repetitive drumbeat of current concerns--for professional development, standard-setting, authentic assessment, an enriched knowledge

base, technological expertise, teachers cannot but occasionally ask themselves "to what end?". There are, of course, the official announcements and prescriptions. There are presumably obvious "goods" linked to each statement of an educational goal. Most often, we realize, the benefits of reform are linked to the nation's welfare, or to market expansion, or to technological dominance in a competitive world. Suppose, however, we were to summon up an articulation of purpose suggested by Rich's "possible happiness, collectivity, community, a loss of isolation." The words imply a reaching out for individual fulfillment among others, in (perhaps) the kind of community in the making John Dewey called democracy. They are, to a degree, abstract, metaphorical; but, speaking indirectly as they do, they respond to some of the evident lacks in our society, to the spaces where people feel solitary and abandoned, to domains of felt powerlessness.

If our purposes were to be framed in such a fashion, they would not exclude the multiple-literacies and the diverse modes of understanding young persons need if they are to act knowledgeably and reflectively within the frameworks of their lived lives. Situatedness; vantage point; the construction of meanings: all can and must be held in mind if teachers are to treat their students with regard, if they are to release them to learn how to learn. Their questions will differ, as their perspectives will differ, along with their memories and their dreams. But if teachers cannot enable them to resist the humdrum, the routine, or what Dewey called the "anesthetic" (1931, p. 40), they will be in danger of miseducative behavior, ending in cul-de-sacs rather than in openings. If situations cannot be created that enable the young to deal with feelings of being manipulated by outside forces, there will be far too little sense of agency among them. Without a sense of agency, young people are unlikely to pose significant questions, the existentially rooted questions in which learning begins. Indeed, it is difficult to picture learner-centered classrooms if students' lived situations are not brought alive, if dread and desire are not both given play. There is too much of a temptation otherwise to concentrate on training rather than teaching, to focus on skills for the work place rather than any "possible happiness" or any real consciousness of self. Drawn to comply, to march in more or less contented lockstep (sneakered, baseball capped, T-shirted), familiar with the same media-derived referents, many youngsters will tacitly agree to enter a community of the competent, to live lives according to "what is." There are, of course, young persons in the inner cities, the ones lashed by "savage inequalities" (Kozol, 1993), the ones whose very schools are made sick by the social problems the young bring in from without (O'Connor, 1996). Here, more frequently than not, are the real tests of "teaching as possibility" in the face of what looks like an impossible social reality at a time when few adults seem to care. There are examples, in Mike Rose's work on "possible lives," for instance, where he expresses his belief that "a defining characteristic of good teaching is a tendency to push on the existing order of things" (1995, p. 428).

In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the child Claudia is explaining her hatred of Shirley Temple dolls, to her the very exemplars of a world of objects, a world in which people yearn for possessions, above all, including white china dolls for Black children. "I did not know why I destroyed those dolls," writes Claudia. "But I did know that nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas. Had any adult with the power to fulfill my desires taken me seriously and asked me what I wanted, they would have known that I did not want anything to own, or to possess any object. I wanted rather to feel something on Christmas day. The real question would have been, 'Dear Claudia, what experience would you like on Christmas?' I could have spoken up, 'I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.' The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama's kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of the music, and, since it would be good to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of a peach, perhaps, afterward" (1972, p. 21). This cannot be attributed to teaching; but it is a "push on the existing order of things"; and it may hold clues to what good teaching can be. Claudia is cared for harshly by her mother; but she is confident of her concern and of her love. She is, at least at that young age, able to resist the existing order of consumable and ownable things and to tap into some deeper need for what she calls "experience." Perhaps this cannot be taught but Claudia's seems to be an insight that underlies the insistences of the culture, that has to do with being sensually alive and within a loving world.

This is not a purely fictional phenomenon. Too many teachers, by now, have read their students' journals and stories and poems; they have exposed themselves to many kinds of dread and many kinds of desire. Much of the suffering, much of the deprivation is due, quite obviously, to economic and social injustices; but there is a sense in which imagination and desire can feed the recognition of the need to transform and, perhaps, the passion to change. To have that sense is to be able to listen to what Wallace Stevens calls "the man with the blue guitar" who "does not play things as they are" (1964, p. 165). Imagination alters the vision of the way things are; it opens spaces in experience where projects can be devised, the kinds of projects that may bring things closer to what ought to be. Without such a capacity, even young people may resemble the inhabitants of the town of Oran Albert Camus described at the start of *The Plague*, "where everyone is bored and devotes himself to cultivating habits." The point is made that you can get through the day without trouble once you have formed habits. In some other places, the narrator says, "People have now and then an inkling of something different" (1948, p. 4). They have had an intimation, and that is so much to the good. He did not necessarily mean an intimation of the end of the plague and a return to normal life. He meant, perhaps, an intimation of mortality, of injustice that has to be struggled against, of silences that have to be acknowledged and at once overcome.

For us, that may imply a recognition, not solely of the human condition, but of the contradictions in what we think of as a democratic society. Even to think about bringing about significant changes within the school is to contest on many levels the behaviorist, stratifying tendencies that still mark the culture as it impinges on the school. To encourage the young to develop visions of what might be and then, against those visions recognize how much is lacking and what it may be to strike against all sorts of easy platitudes that obscure the turmoil of change. Most of us realize that, only when we envisage a better social order, do we find the present one in many ways unendurable and stir ourselves to repair. The sight and description of the new schools at the present time- the Coalition schools, the Charter schools, the New Vision Schools--make it uniquely possible to identify what is wrong with the traditional schools. All we need to do is to take heed of what can happen when a junior high school girl, caught in an overcrowded city school, visits one of the new theme schools. Abruptly, she may notice what is lacking in her own school: a brightly decorated classroom, small groups and family circles, a breaking through of the forty-five minute class period. Without witnessing a better state of things, she could not have realized what was lacking, what was wrong.

Sometimes, introduced to a reflective or a learning community, someone will become aware of the dearth of understanding in her/his own domain, of the blocks to knowing and to questioning. Sometimes, a teacher or a relative or a friend may pay heed, as does the singer Shug Avery in *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982). She suggests to Miss Celie a way of being without "that old white man" in her head, actually a way of becoming free. Celie writes: "Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?) Not the little wild flowers. Nothing." (p. 25). She, too, made aware of alternatives, can discover that "she feels like a fool" because of what she was never enabled to notice and about which she had never asked.

Inklings and intimations, of course, are not sufficient, as the townspeople in Oran discovered when they organized sanitary squads to fight the plague, "since they knew it was the only thing to do" (p. 120). Imagination is what imparts a conscious quality to experience and the realization that things do not repeat themselves, that experience should not be expected to be uniform or frictionless. Imagination, moreover, is enriched and stimulated through live encounters with others, through exposure to diverse vantage points and unfamiliar ways of looking at the world. Imagination should not, however, as Dewey warned, be permitted to run loose so that it merely builds "castles in the air" and lets "them be a substitute for an actual achievement which involves the pains of thought" (1916, p. 404). Yes, there are distinctive moments made possible by the poetic imagination; but the social and ethical

imagination is concerned for using ideas and aspirations to reorganize the environment or the lived situation.

Paulo Freire had this in mind when he wrote about the shaping of a critical discourse that showed adult learners "the lovelier world to which they aspired was being announced, somehow anticipated, in their imagination. It was not a matter of idealism. Imagination and conjecture about a different world than the one of oppression are as necessary to the praxis of historical 'subjects' (agents in the process of transforming reality as it necessarily belongs to human toil that the worker or artisan first have in his or her head a design a 'conjecture,' of what he or she is about to make"(1994, p. 39). Freire believes that democratic education requires enabling ordinary people to develop their own language, derived from their readings of their own social realities, their own namings, their own anticipations of a better state of things. We might return to the present use of story-telling, especially contextualized story-telling, by means of which young people explore the influences of social life on their becoming, of race and gender and ethnic membership, of traditions, of the stories told to them.

Dialogue can arise from story telling in a shared classroom space; and out of dialogue and conjecture can come the making of projects also shared. They may be as simple and concrete as polling the neighborhood mothers on immunization of their babies, as rehabilitating rooms somewhere for homeless classmates, as volunteering for a tutoring program, as organizing street dances or a marching band. There is considerable talk these days of how fair societies may be nurtured in families, schools, work places, and congregations. Modern democracies, says Michael Sandel (1996), can be nourished close to home, in settings where people experience and act upon accepted responsibility. One of his examples is of the civil rights movement, which actually began in small black Baptist churches in the South and extended from there to a national movement. We might be reminded also of Vaclav Havel writing from prison a decade ago. He found hope in small student movements, ecological movements, peace movements, because he believed that "human communality" begins in a "renaissance of elementary human relationships which new projects can at the very most only mediate" (1989, p. 371). This may well ascribe new importance to the school and to teachers willing to foster the values Havel talked about: "love, charity, sympathy, tolerance, understanding, self-control, solidarity, friendship, feelings of belonging, the acceptance of concrete responsibility for those close to one"--all with an eye on the social formations that decide the fate of the world. Freire, also thinking of how to move beyond the small community, the local, spoke about "the invention of citizenship," clearly with imagination in mind once again (p. 39).

The processes of speaking, writing, and reading must be attended to; there must be reflectiveness with regard to the languages in use--the language of

images, of technology, of ordinary communication grounded in everyday life. The current interest in narrative and in the landscapes on which people's stories take shape is enabling many learners to explore their own idioms, to create projects by means of which they can identify themselves. To do that is inevitably to take the social setting into account, the social situation without which no self can come to be. We might recall Edward Said saying that no one is purely one thing, that "labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind" (1991, p. 336). We need to listen to other echoes in the garden, he reminds us, to attend to the continuity of old traditions as well as to the connections only now being disclosed. Both require a consciousness of location, an awareness of both contemporaries and predecessors.

We are realizing how much the negotiation of identity today has to do with connectedness and membership; and the notion of participant membership has to feed into our conceptions of democratic citizenship. Visions of public spaces may open, if we allow them to, spaces where all kinds of persons can come together in collaborative concern for what is lacking or what is wrong, what needs to be improved or repaired. The greatest obstacle in the way, as Hannah Arendt saw it, is "thoughtlessness--the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of truths which have become trivial and empty..." (1958, p. 5). Clearly, this has pedagogical implications, as did Dewey's warning about a "social pathology" standing in the way of inquiry into social conditions. "It manifests itself in a thousand ways," he wrote, "in querulousness, in impotent drifting, in uneasy snatching at distractions, in idealization of the long established, in a facile optimism assumed as a cloak, in glorification of things 'as they are'..." (1954, p. 170). Again, there is the implied demand for attention to a "blue guitar," even as persons are asked to think about their own thinking, their own denials, their own ends in view. Both Dewey and Arendt paid attention to the problem of impersonality and to the empty sociability taking over from community. Both spoke of business, consumerism, and (in time) of bureaucracy. Action and the sense of agency were crucial for both; their writings urged readers to appear before one another, to allow something to take shape between them, a space where diverse beings could reach towards possibility.

Both knew that dialogue and communication were focal and, when conceivable, face-to-face communication, with persons addressing one another as who, not what they were. It was the lack of authentic communication, Dewey wrote, that led to the "eclipse of the public." He pointed out that Americans had at hand "the physical tools of communication as never before, but the thoughts and aspirations congruent with them are not communicated and therefore are not common. Without such communication, the public will remain shadowy and formless, seeking spasmodically for itself, but seizing and holding its shadow rather than its

substance" (1954, p. 142). Writing seventy years ago, Dewey may have anticipated the predicaments of a computerized society with a public transmuted into audience or listeners interested in consumption of ideas as well as goods. He might not have been surprised by the crotchety, of insulting telephone calls to the talk shows by the prayerful heaves at evangelists' meetings, the shouts at rock concerts, the hoots and screams at football games. Certainly, people are entitled to make all sorts of sounds, to express themselves in multiple ways; but when the "thoughts and aspirations" Dewey sought are subsumed under noise and sound bytes, teachers are challenged to pay heed.

Classroom preoccupations with efficacy or technical efficiency or even "world-class standards" will not solve the problem of communication or the "eclipse of the public." Nor will they suffice when it comes to consideration of the arts of practice, much less the arts and mystery of being human. The things covered up by "highly efficient talk and double talk" (Arendt, 1968, p. viii) still call for many kinds of illumination. Teachers may well be among the few in a position to kindle the light that might illuminate the spaces of discourse and events in which young newcomers have some day to find their ways. Dewey wrote that "democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion. It had its seer in Walt Whitman" (1954, p. 184). Whitman's "Song of Myself" comes insistently to mind, with its call for liberation and for equity! "Unscrew the locks from the doors!", he wrote. "Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs'/ Whoever degrades another degrades me,/ And whatever is done or said returns at last to me./ Through me the afflatus surging and surging, through me the current and index./ I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,/ By God' I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms" (1931, p. 53). Dewey knew this was not a definition of democracy, nor a series of slogans nor a sermon nor a lesson in political science. The function of art "has always been," he said, "to break through the conventionalized and routine consciousness." Art is what touches "the deeper levels of life," and when they are touched "they spring up as desire and thought. This process is art." And then: "Artists have always been the real purveyors of the news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation" (p. 184).

It must be noted that Dewey affirmed the uses of the arts in the midst of a study of the public, and he spoke about the "deeper levels of life" at the end of the chapter called "Search for the Great Community." Not only was he emphasizing the place of art experiences in moving persons beyond what was fixed and stale and taken for granted. He was suggesting once again the importance of informing the state of social affairs with knowledge, intelligence, and the kinds of connections--past and present--that compose the fabric of what we have come to call the common world. Teachers, often

troubled by charges of imposition of white, western culture upon young people arriving from different worlds, are often at a loss when it comes to providing the kinds of shared cultural referents that help weave networks of relationship. There was a time when the Scriptures offered something in common, or the orations of statesmen like Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, or certain plays of Shakespeare, or folktales or (beginning in the 19th century) fictions capturing aspects of the American experience at sea, in the woods on the rivers, on the open roads. It is said today that television shows have replaced such common cultural holdings: "David Letterman", "The Today Show," and "Saturday Night Live" shape the culture's conversation, and the "deeper levels of life" are rolled over or ignored.

Teachers concerned about illumination and possibility know well that there is some profound sense in which a curriculum in the making is very much a part of a community in the making. Many are aware of the call on the part of hitherto marginal groups--ethnic minorities, women, gays and lesbians--for an inclusion of their own traditions in what is sometimes thought of as the "core" of intellectual and artistic life. For all the dissonances and uneasiness, there is a demand for a kind of historical consciousness on the part of diverse persons within and outside of their associations. That signifies a recognition that the past is like a stream in which all of us in our distinctiveness and diversity participate every time we try to understand. There are, of course, thousands of silenced voices still; there are thousands of beings striving for visibility; there are thousands of interpretations still to be made, thousands of questions to be posed.

The common world we are trying to create may be thought of as a fabric of interpretations of many texts, many images, many sounds. We might think of interpreted experiences with such texts taking the place of a tradition in the old sense of canonical objectivity. When Hannah Arendt wrote about a common world (1958), she put her stress on the innumerable perspectives through which that common world perceives itself and for which a common denominator can never be devised. In a classroom, this would mean acknowledgment of and recognition of the different biographical histories that affect the shaping of perspectives. More than in previous times, teachers are asked to confront and honor the differences even as they work for a free and responsible acceptance of the norms marking whatever community is in the making: concrete responsibility for one another; respect for the rights of others; solidarity; regard for reflective habits of thought. At once, there are the ways of thinking and seeing that enable various young persons to decode and interpret what is made available: the ability to distinguish among the discourses in use, to have regard for evidence and experience, to be critically conscious of what is read and heard, to construct meanings in the diverse domains of their lives. "Be it grand or slender," said Toni Morrison in her Nobel Address, "burrowing, blasting or refusing to sanctify; whether it laughs out loud or is a cry without an alphabet, the choice word or the

chosen silence, unmolested language surges toward knowledge, not its destruction. But who does not know of literature banned because it is interrogative; discredited because it is critical; erased because alternate? And how many are outraged by the thought of a self-ravaged tongue? Word-work is sublime because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference--the way in which we are like no other life. We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives" (March/April 1996, p. 11). This should apply to all the young, whoever they are, if--like Whitman and Morrison as well--we refuse at last to withhold recognition, to degrade or to exclude.

Michael Fischer, an ethnologist also concerned for connectedness, writes about the importance of the present tendency to encourage participation of readers themselves in the production of meaning. The conscious effort to move readers to respond to incompleteness and make connections becomes, he suggests, an ethical device attempting to activate in readers a "desire for communitas with others, while preserving rather than effacing differences" (1986, p. 233). We might visualize interpretive encounters with Hawthorne's Hester Prynne daring to engage in speculative thought while living on the verge of the wilderness; Melville's Bartleby who "preferred not to," compared with "a piece of wreckage in the mid Atlantic": Edith Wharton's Lily Bart, caught like a cog in the wheel of a material society. Or we might think of the narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man* saying he has "whipped it all except the mind, the mind. And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived." Or the chaos due to nameless pollution and the falsifications of the media in De Lillo's *White Noise*, or Doctorow's cities with their denials and their cover-ups and their violations of children. Or Tillie Olsen's narrator standing behind her ironing board, hoping only that her daughter will be more than a dress beneath the iron. And so many other voices, Hispanic and Asian and Native American, all activating questions whose answers create no "common denominator," but which make each text deeper, richer, more expansive, yes, and more replete with mystery.

That, in part, suggests what is meant by teaching as possibility in dark and constraining times. It is a matter of awakening and empowering today's young people to name, to reflect, to imagine, and to act with more and more concrete responsibility in an increasingly multifarious world. At once, it is a matter of enabling them to remain in touch with dread and desire, with the smell of lilacs and the taste of a peach. The light may be uncertain and flickering; but teachers in their lives and works have the remarkable capacity to make it shine in all sorts of corners and, perhaps, to move newcomers to join with others and transform. Muriel Rukeyser has written:

Darkness arrives
splitting the mind open.

Something again
 Is beginning to be born.
 A dance is dancing me.
 I wake in the dark.
 (1994, p. 284)

She offers a metaphor and a watchword. It may help us light the fuse.

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