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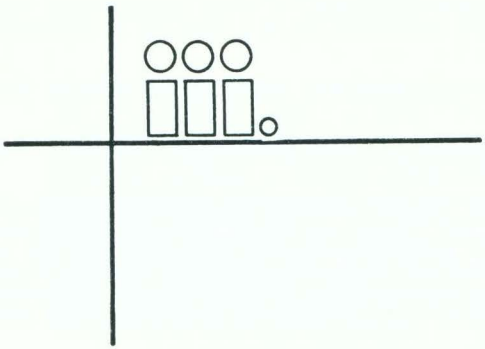

Education for Wholeness

By Arnold Gerstein

More and more, my commitment to teaching has come to reflect what I am doing outside of the classroom. My idea of a life outside the classroom dictates, to some extent, what I try to reconstruct in the classroom. Martin Buber has called this "education of character." A person with such an education, unlike the nihilist of today, would deny no answer to life and the world, and would "accept responsibility for everything essential he meets."[1] Education of character is the education for the unity of the person, life and action.

Up to now, we educators have delivered the individual (not a person) into a professional skill (with its increment of higher status), and tried at the same time to educate him in a liberal fashion. A liberally educated individual was conceived to be one who was better able to take his place in the modern world. He was to be a kind of Mr. Spock—a logical, rather perfect, guilt-free specimen of the species, a well-adjusted individual. I think taking the Mr. Spocks and Captain Kirks of our imagination as models encourages the false strength of man, indeed, his very weakness and doubtfulness.

The questionable side of man, according to Buber, lies in man's almost total inability to confirm his fellow man as what he is and what he can become. To be a man (i.e., a person, not merely an individual), is to bring or fail to bring all our resources at any given moment into our response to the demands of a concrete situation. The inability to do this is the source of our locked up potentialities and, when we fail, of our feelings of real, "existential" guilt.[2]

This requires some translation. The education of character does not mean the learning of maxims or habits and their inter-relation-

ships. It means not *remaining* in and with ourselves. In the context of my teaching, it means not interfering with the independence of the student to form and to ask questions about that which he wants to know or become aware of now, that which disturbs or delights him now, and that which he may come to know tomorrow. Interference occurs when we manipulate the student to our way of seeing the world and man, rather than opening him up and drawing him in. This is no simple task since it involves fairly constant trust so the student can become aware of the truth of the unity of the person, its integrity, the unity of life and action, theory and practice, thought and feeling.

I must enter a demurrer at this point. The education of character requires great modesty on our part, and the removal of irrational guilt, when we fail. It is no easier, and certainly no less painful, to change the nature of the classroom than to change our personality or mentality from that of a slave to that of a free man. Moreover, "neither the greatness that was Greece nor the grandeur that was Rome was based in any way upon structures comparable to universities."[3]

Are universities taking over the task of the family, the church, the community at large? Are we attempting to help a person get through the pain of a prolonged adolescence? If so, we must realize our limitations. By the mere fact of keeping him in a university and thus preventing him from assuming responsibility, we delay his growing out of adolescence. His initial and, perhaps, never to be regained responsibility has been taken from him the moment he was removed from work in society, given a special status of student, and separated from society by the university. Prolonged schooling displaced the student from apprenticeship, and led to a "hardening of class lines, as educational advantages accumulated in the upper bourgeoisie and the professional and managerial strata." We are thus left with the social problem of adolescence that was caused by detention in schools. The detention was meant as a cure but has only made matters worse. The university has become a service institution, a multiversity with all of the corporate policies of an administrative bureaucracy, that leaves the professor alone to do his work, with the student as his institutional proletariat.[4]

An additional reason for modesty is the fact that the student does not center his life upon what happens in the classroom. He, moreover, comes to us with years of experience, in and out of the classroom, which are antagonistic to the task of education of character, though perhaps not to education for a profession. They were years of boredom, self-indulgence, mediocre excitement, and very little real responsibility. Thus, he often comes to us as a dependent individual, and our institution further encourages that dependence rather than fostering other values. Consequently, our students, for the most part, are not

inspired by hope or conscious of joy in the classroom. This is not surprising, since in private, they are burdened by anxiety which feeds on their anticipation of and dependence on receiving affection or recognition while not involved in freely giving it. The vain search for recognition leads to competition or, paradoxically, to its avoidance in the safety of despondency. In either case, the mystery of unity and the beauty of courage and self-responsibility cannot emerge. Students search for recognition by either aggressive assertiveness ("I'll show you, just try to teach me.") or excessive timidity (the fear of losing whatever recognition or worth one already has). Teachers, too, contribute to this by asserting their dominating position as an authority, or by being so thoroughly non-directive as to appear lacking in self-confidence. I suspect that, here, too, the motives are the teachers' search for recognition and love. In one way or another, all of us are involved, at some time or another, with greater or less frequency, in the defense of professional, individual, or institutional privilege and control in order to effect change while preserving a tenuous feeling of "self."

Education Through Communion

The opposite of domination or control is trust. To trust means to open up and draw in, to include the other person through an appreciation and understanding of how he is different from you. Finally, it means allowing ourselves to be changed by him. This description also points to the meaning of contact.

The generating of trust is necessary to the open pursuit of truth, but it is only a means. Generating trust and the pursuit of truth are often confused, especially now when the open classroom with its removal of boundaries between student and teacher is so popular. Trust, for Carl Rogers and Martin Buber, at least, means regarding the other person as an individual of unconditional worth, just as he is now and as he yet may become. Change is built into the full acceptance of a person's actuality. Given trust, in this sense, he cannot help but change. Thus, freedom, to be and to become, through trust is the "tuning of the violin," "the run before the jump."[5] If freedom does not lead anywhere, if a student does not come to discover his ability to confirm his fellow man as what he is and can become, no learning takes place. A non-learning context is one in which we make false, insubstantial claims for confirmation, claims lacking any relationship to being and becoming. In such a context, we ought not be surprised if change does not occur, if students do not ask questions, if they refuse curiosity. We must become aware of when we have failed to confirm truly. For me, this failure is signalled by a feeling of being off center, of pursuing vain motives, and, finally, of the recognition of those motives together with the feeling of being off center.

Distance and Relation

Trust generates *contact* between students and teachers and between

student and student. We, thus, have a chance to glimpse real humanity unfolding whenever the capacity for true confirmation occurs. From the point of view of teacher and student, however, the value of communion can be realized only if reciprocal inclusion is avoided. Educating relationships are like doctor-patient relationships, and are as difficult to maintain. They must be one-sided inclusions (the teacher comes to help the student), in order to preserve the tension of discovery and surprise. The moment the student comes to experience the educating process used by the teacher, the moment he becomes aware of what is going on from the standpoint of the teacher, at that moment, says Buber, the relationship is burst asunder or transformed into friendship.[6] By friendship Buber meant a concrete experience of mutual inclusion—the other person experiences the effect you are trying to produce.

The teacher must hold the student at a proper distance (a one-sided inclusion), so the student can come to hear himself, hear the logic as well as the rhetoric of his thought, hear the content as well as the process, hear the emerging gestalt as it emerges. The maintenance of distance also helps me assume responsibility for either influencing my students or merely listening without interfering in their lives. It helps to keep me from achieving my own self-esteem by manipulating them. Maintaining proper distance helps us to resist two dangers in the classroom. One is the desire of the student to be dominated; the other is our desire to dominate, our will to power in and of itself.[7] In both cases what must be relinquished is manipulation of the student in the name of testing or reinforcing (our or the student's) feelings of self-worth and self-love. (Relinquishing manipulation and control does not mean giving up self-assertion *per se.*) Our failure to relinquish such control in the classroom is related to our failure to do so outside the classroom. The balance between distance and intimacy arises both spontaneously and from reflective thought. I can respect the independence of the student, and my own as well, only if I resist the subtlest forms of manipulation and control.

Achieving independence or individuality, however, does not yet mean becoming human or a man. We do not yet have a *person* when we have an individual. An individual may remain free, doing his own thing, but yet be aloof, uninterested in accepting others as they are or confirming them in what they are meant to become. Thus, a teacher, as an individual, might merely be interested in professing his own ideas and his own individuality and never become a man, a part of humanity. If so, he is merely a professional acting out his role, refusing to admit the distance to which the student has entered his private sector. This type of teacher cannot allow himself to be changed by his students.

In a real meeting between two people both are changed. Even so,

hopefully, we, as teachers, will not lose sight of our role of helping the student, nor begin looking for help from, or seeking to be known by our students. Above all, let it not become a battle over who can see whom with less distortion. It easily can become so for a teacher who is unaccustomed to *accepting* and *confirming* the student as a *person.* Acceptance and confirmation is a delicate dynamic process learned through repeated missing, through negative feedback. Simultaneously, we must *be with* the student, and yet with ourselves; separate, but involved.

Buber thinks we and the students are not equals, in a certain sense. This may be hard to accept both by those who demand the removal of all barriers, as well as those who will not remove any barriers. For instance, when a student asks about my experience, my feelings, attitudes or judgments, I am tempted to tell him unless I realize that the situation of detached presence (on which the teacher-student relationship depends), may be destroyed. Many of us think we can generate trust in this way. Or we think we can come to be accepted by the students. In either case, the motive may be our need for recognition. Such self-revelation ought not be made as a demonstration of equality. It is legitimate, only if based on a desire to accept and confirm the student, and not to draw attention to ourselves.

The test of whether or not we are educating for character and wholeness is our transcendence of personal or moral judgments when we enter into conflict with our students. Winning the confidence of our students, however, does not mean winning their agreement. It does mean carrying them through a conflict we have provoked by pointing out a third direction.

For instance, if a student denies the universal validity of certain norms (such as, "Thou shalt not bear false witness") because of certain conditions or qualifications (such as, the survival of a people or nation), no argument showing the validity of the norm would help the student accept its validity. The student may be a product of a certain temper and disposition in which eternal values have been replaced by faith in parties, groups, or some collective or movement. Only if the educator can lead the student away from the trap of collectivism into selfhood can such a universal norm make any sense. We can begin to talk about absolute values only if we have first illuminated the value of becoming an independent person, with all the pain involved in that process.

This, however, presupposes a constant process of self-education. I mean a process that stresses the value of and the relationship between a unified person and a unified life. To suceed at this, the teacher interested in education of character must become what he is talking about. We are whatever we are doing. Noticing what we are doing, (for instance, how often we interfere with the independence and re-

sponsibility of the student), becomes an essential task for the teacher. Being what we are talking about influences a student, more than anything else, to approach the objective we have in mind. When I am off center, I find it very helpful to note what sort of gestures, tone of voice or arrangement of thought have contributed to the loss of an effective distance with my students.

As a teacher, I must constantly ask myself: What sort of effective power am I really giving to my students? What am I hoping to give them? What motives have stood in the way of bringing my most genuine self to bear in the classroom? In order to focus on these motives, I find it useful to distinguish between the process and the content of what goes on in the classroom.

The content does not always parallel the way in which I am saying it or presenting it. If the latent message of the process and the expressed meaning of the content correspond, then we experience the opposite of duplicity in our motives. Buber has called this entelechy the "hidden influence proceeding from integrity, which has its own integrating force."

It is a very demanding task to remain the "unmoved mover," not getting caught up in the disappointing or the pleasurable effect of what we are doing. If we cannot maintain at least a good average of non-interference, we will remain emotionally confused and ineffective. We will also cause our students to stay dependent on us or to rebel against us, in anger or indifference.[8]

John Dewey defines education of character as training a person to be a competent learner by supplying him with appropriate habits and maxims. I, however, am interested in the slow or sudden emergence, when the situation demands, of a powerful will of self from a layer where the person assumes full and total responsibility. Actions and attitudes emerge united from that layer in the act of accepting responsibility for the claim made, on oneself, by any situation.[9] Buber suggests that we, as teachers, study the structure of great character in order to learn how to elicit credible and desirable values in ourselves. This will, also, help overcome our dependence upon the "collective or individual Moloch" by revealing the source of such dependency—our own painful relation to ourselves.

> These young people, it is true, do not yet realize that their blind devotion to the collective, e.g., to the party, was not a genuine act of their personal life; they do not realize that it sprang, rather, from the fear of being left, in this age of confusion, to rely on themselves, on a self which no longer receives its direction from eternal values.[10]

We must not be lured into yielding to our students', or our own,

desire to relinquish responsibility, to remain passive, to be spaced out, or to be comforted and loved. From this, as from all escapes, we can only return angry, depressed and in despair. The educator begins his task by recognizing the sterility and feeling of deprivation in the student and himself. These come from the inability and the weakness of the individual who has ceased to "decide what he does or does not, and assume responsibility for it. . . ."[11]

I want to emphasize, again, the importance of models. If we are not aware of our own lacks, our own deprivation, and if we do not manage to be less deprived than our students, we will never awaken their consciousness to the value of becoming decisive and responsible human beings. If we are unwilling or unable to do this, the only alternative is to regard the unity of a person and of life as a futile, romantic ideal. Unified and responsible persons are the prerequisite for any transcendence of collectivism or individualism. Education of character is also education for community.

In experiencing the uncanny nature of inner personal unity we can come to respect the mystery of unity in all its forms—unity between people, with nature, or with the universe. The mystery of unity can be witnessed in sudden, unpredictable moments of felt mutuality between persons during a brown-out, a tornado, in a bomb shelter, or a theater, a concert hall. In these situations two people who never knew one another are "ontically" involved in the unitary demands of each situation. The dialogue between the two disappears when things return to normal. The mysterious experience of unity and responsibility is open to all of us at moments of self-transcendence if we can respond to the essential demand of the situation. It foreshadows experiences of ultimate value between ourselves as persons and the intelligible cosmos. And yet, at present such experiences are rare and tenuous because of problems that overwhelm us and blind us from our integrating powers.

FOOTNOTES

1. Martin Buber, *Between man and Man* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1969), p. 116.
2. Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), Chapter 6.
3. *New York Times,* Jan. 10, 1962, p. 28.
4. Lasch, Christopher, "Going to School," *The New York Review of Books,* February 10, 1972.
5. Buber, *Between Man and Man,* p. 91.
6. *Ibid.,* p. 88.
7. *Ibid.,* p. 116.
8. *Ibid.,* p. 90.
9. *Ibid.,* p. 90.
10. *Ibid.,* p. 115.
11. *Ibid.,* p. 115.