Learning to Swim

Richard R. Williams

Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives

Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Liberal Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Michigan University at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspectives (1969-1979) by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.
Among the classic lore of the Middle East is an achievement which has been called "the strangest in the history of metaphysics." The reference is to a body of popular jokes known collectively as *The Subtleties of Mulla Nasrudin:*¹ the adventures of a legendary Sufi master who turns the most mundane of situations into occasions for teaching what can be called the timeless lesson.

In one of the Mulla tales, the master appears in the guise of a ferryboatman transporting a scholar across a piece of rough water. While attempting to create conversation, the Mulla chances to make a grammatical error. "Have you never studied grammar?" asks the scholar. "No," replies the Mulla. "Then you have wasted half of your life," he admonishes. After a few moments of silence the Mulla turns to his passenger: "Have you ever learned to swim?" "No," he answers, "why?" "Because all your life has been wasted—we are sinking."

It is with a similar kind of sinking feeling that I approach discussions of aims and achievements in education. For, regardless of the current flurry of excitement concerning new directions in teaching and learning, I feel that we are still adrift and perilously off course when it comes to assessing what is in our best interest. Almost everyone nowadays is talking about educational reforms and there is a good deal of agreement that change must be in the direction of fostering more humanistic, life-enhancing processes. More often than not, however,

*A version of this paper was presented at the College of Dupage, Glen Ellyn, Illinois, on September 22, 1971 where, as a visiting scholar, Dr. Williams addressed the College's annual Instructional Seminar.*
what we term bold new ventures into self-discovery, enhancement of growth, or whatever phrase suits our taste, are actually old and quite stale wines in new wineskins. An old saying I like very much is that before we act in accordance with our best interests, we should be certain that we really know what our best interests are. Which is to say, I believe we generally pay less attention to what is really worth teaching than we do to how to pull education off. In the same way, we fail to see how difficulties encountered in designing pedagogical techniques can be symptoms of a poorly comprehended purpose, a distorted view of organismic processes, or both. As in logic, when a properly stated problem is seen to contain, in part, its own solution, so also an educational philosophy, validly conceived, suggests its own pedagogical devices. The point being, that puzzling over how to teach in an effective, humane and self-fulfilling way often results from having the sentiment for a new education, but not an understanding of the immensely different ways in which we must first perceive ourselves, other people, and the universal processes we call life. As the old saw goes, we seem to know the words, but not the music. Accordingly, let us exercise care in assuming that our innovative ideas about education are really innovative, and not just some reiterated themes of yesterday adorned with the modish fashions of today's vocabulary.

Said all at once, the most difficult thing imaginable is to get outside ourselves long enough to discover a new perspective; one not dictated by preconceived notions of what that new perspective should be. Like the frustrations experienced in a hall of mirrors, each new direction attempted brings us full circle to a familiar reflection. But this dilemma is necessary only as long as we are forced to choose alternatives within the frame of a fixed world view. This world view which, paradoxically, defines and predisposes each and every one of our attempts to get outside it is a mode of orientation which I will call the operational mode. That is, we see life as progressing along a linear dimension—past, present and future—such that whatever happens next seemingly is, or should be, subject to predetermination and control. This is where we are most deeply in trouble. In fact, this is where we are all quite insane, and in our lunacy would have our students join us, for the reason that madness, like all misery, loves company.

For example, many educators are concerned about ways to integrate cognition and emotion in learning experiences; but to me this is more an indication of a worsening of symptoms than a reversal in a pathological syndrome. Over and over again it becomes apparent that the wish to involve affective experiences is tainted by an ulterior motive: the intention is not so much to include feelings, intuitions and instincts as co-equal partners in existence as it is to further submit them, in perhaps a more sophisticated way, to the designs of an intellect that functions as if the world were nothing but a matrix of operational pro-
cedures. While thinking we are striving toward new depths in both understanding and realizing a richer, fuller existence, we nevertheless insist that whatever this turns out to be must be manageable in the way of prediction and control. A similar kind of problem was visualized nearly a century ago by Fredrich Nietzsche who wrote in his *Twilight of the Gods*:

... what an atmosphere prevails among the scholars [Nietzsche says], what a spiritual desert, how lukewarm and complacent. It would be a profound mistake to bring up German science against me on this point—and a proof, besides, that not a single word I have written had been read. For I have been calling attention for the past seventeen years, untiringly, to the despiritualizing influence of our present-day science industry. The hard helotism to which the prodigious range of the contemporary sciences condemns every individual scholar is the main reason why the fuller, richer more profoundly endowed of our students can no longer find appropriate education or educators. There is nothing from which this culture suffers more than from a superabundance of pretentious corner-watchers and fragments of humanity; and the universities ... are the real hothouses of this kind of stunting of the spiritual instincts. All of Europe has already a realization of this: no one is fooled by our high politics ... Germany is regarded, more and more, as Europe's Flatland.2

Let us take special note of Nietzsche's use of the phrase "hard helotism" which he says "condemns every individual scholar." Helotism refers to a system under which a nominally free social class or religious, national, or racial minority is permanently oppressed and degraded. How, we ask, can this be applied to our present discussion? Its relevance is seen in taking a deep and very penetrating look at the assumptions we make about the way life is: those assumptions that lie well beneath the level of immediate awareness, but, nevertheless, shape the values, attitudes, and preceptions that constitute the life experience. We find within that remote sphere a critically delimiting system of influences that dictates our understandings of the world in a no less tyrannical manner than a Machiavellian prince who, spinning his illusory web of freedoms and well-being, disguises the compulsions embedded therein. But how is this brought about? It makes our heads spin! How is it that even our most imaginative speculations and altruistic efforts, virtually bubbling with expansiveness and free self-expression, are nevertheless caught in the fabric of an illusion; one we find so difficult to stand outside of long enough to perceive hitherto unimagined possibilities? Joseph Campbell has provided us a glimpse into this problem:
First [says Campbell], we receive a religious training in coined platitudes from a world as far from the modern as any could possibly be; next, a so-called liberal arts education, by way of lecture courses, seminars and quizzes, week by week: “great books” summarized and evaluated, stuffed into emptied heads as authorized information, to be signalled back, for grades; and then the sciences—at the outer reaches of thought!—all taught by sterilized authorities who, in those unrecapturable years of their own youth, when the ears, eyes, and heart of the spirit open to the marvel of oneself and the universe, were condemned to that same helotism of which Nietzsche writes. There is no time, no place, no permission—let alone encouragement—for experience. And to make things even worse, along now comes those possessed sociopolitical maniacs with their campus rallies, picket-line slogans, journalistic ballyhoo, and summonses to action in the name of causes of which their callow flocks had scarcely heard six months before—and even those marginal hours that might have been left from study for inward growth are invaded, wrecked, and strewn with daily rubbish. It is hardly to be wondered that the young people of the world today look a bit like rubbish-strewn rooms themselves, and in their Dionysiac “trips” and “happenings” promise to match the agapes of the early Christian Church.3

Can we see in these remarks a complaint similar to one I raised earlier concerning an operational mode that so severely shapes our experience and orientation to the world and ourselves? As I see it, this shaping is so complete that even our most heroic efforts to shake things loose results in getting them more up-tight. Frankly, my blood runs cold whenever I hear educators talk about instructional objectives, behavioral objectives and the like when, in the name of anything in the least sane, natural or just humane, we should learn when to leave people alone. If we wish to live, as one says, organically, let us understand that a basic principle of all life is a certain tendency toward inner as well as outer symmetry. Which is to say, a striving to find one’s own center of balance, not one imposed by well-intentioned zealots whose every attempt to make things better makes them worse.

What then, it will be asked, are the alternatives? What I propose is a serious consideration of a rather strange sounding concoction called “hermetic pedagogy.”

Thomas Mann in the “Magic Mountain” [Joseph Campbell goes on to say] makes a good deal of the term “hermetic pedagogy.” The idea suggested is of a sealing-off from historical time and an inward-turning to inward time: activation of the mind
through appropriate influences from without, but then a response in terms of one's readiness and pace of growth, not the needs, ideals and expectations of anyone else, any group, or any so-called world. On the flatland life is reaction, whereas on the timeless mountaintop—as in the alchemist's vas hermeticum—there can be fermentation, spontaneity, action as opposed to reaction: truly what is meant by the term "education" (e-ducare, "to lead or draw forth") as opposed to "inculcation" (in-culcare, "to stamp in with the heel"). And, absolutely indispensable for any such development is that separation from the demands of the day which all educators—until recently—understood to be the first requirement for anything approaching a spiritual life.4

There is much in Campbell's remarks for us to learn. Let me point out, for example, a basic principle concerning actions and reactions well understood by ancient alchemists and metal workers. That any time one undertakes a transformation of ores or other ingredients into a different state, he is interceding in time. In other words, alchemists felt that ores left undisturbed in the earth's womb would transform or "ripen" according to their own temporal rhythms.5 Altering the process through intercession was equivalent, therefore, to engaging in dreadfully serious and risky business, fraught with the dangers of violating the cosmos itself and/or displeasing a god who had set the whole thing in motion. Men of the twentieth century, however, tend to disregard natural rhythms right and left, secure in the notion that science can perform wonders and that anything that goes wrong, science can set right.

In our educational enterprises also, we tend to blindly rush forth to intercede wherever possible with a blatant disregard of any inner process or harmony that follows a logic of its own, not that of the ruling intellect. If we wish to intercede in the sphere of the emotions, we had better respect its inner rules which are as different from the logic of intellect as anything can be. Rail against the unscientific sounding terms as much as one wishes, when we deal with so-called emotions we also deal in the realm of instincts, intuitions, dreams, myths and the rest of a greater part of ourselves that exists in a sphere beyond the reach of grammar. As we look about at the shapes of our lives and the environment we have plundered to nourish our power-mad intellects, we wonder anew at the words of our mysterious ferry-boatman to the grammar-ridden scholar: "all of your life has been wasted—we are sinking."

Nietzsche, Campbell, and Mann have provided us with a hint for escaping our dilemma. A prerequisite for getting on with hermetic pedagogy is to desist in some maneuvers now under way. We must see,
for example, that the several versions of “sensitivity” approaches to education are laden with risks. If sensitivity groups actually dealt with learning how to open one’s senses to the world, this would be desirable; but to my knowledge there is nothing particularly “sensory” in the versions that invade the classroom. If anything, they tend to be amateurish dabbling with emotions designed to “open people up.” A first principle of “hermetic pedagogy” is to respect a certain readiness to respond in regard to a person’s own pace of growth. That person’s pace. Let us, therefore, respect silence and allow people the right, so important to their health, of remaining sealed up until their own fermentation has taken place.

As a case in point, during the past few years I have had the opportunity of observing attempts by a number of university faculty to bring about reforms in the structures and functions of general education. Moreover, in one way or another I have been in the thick of proposing and carrying forward some experimental ventures. A valuable lesson learned so far is that one must keep a close eye on himself while he looks to the welfare of others—that is, students. There is always, I have found, a great likelihood that the operations to which one wishes to expose people are really hoped-for therapeutic procedures which will benefit not the students, but the operator himself. This is nowhere more apparent than in the proposals themselves: statements of “philosophy” and “goals” of a general education. From one prospectus to another the purposes are stated in terms such as “living a fuller life,” “individual growth,” “self-development,” “compassionate communication and relationship,” and so forth. No one, least of all myself, should quarrel with aspirations such as these. But to whom are they directed? The students? Or ourselves? In other words, is there any reason for thinking that faculty are just human enough to bear some of the faults they see “out there” in the rest of society, and that sensing a lack of development in themselves would have their students play out a self-actualization drama in vicarious fulfillment of their own wishes and needs? “Yes,” one might reply, “that can be the case, which is why we must learn and grow with our students!” Very well, I say, let’s do it; but only after we have carefully considered some differences between them and ourselves which can be quite imposing.

Specifically, can we safely make the general assumption that students are experiencing the same pace of development as ourselves, and at the same characteristic stage; that they are psychologically ready for the sorts of engagements and ripenings we like to call self-actualizing? Or can many or most people (including ourselves) be working through stages of individual development that, as Abraham Maslow points out, are necessarily prior to the business of self-fulfillment needs. There are other needs, Maslow says, and these are: 1. physiological needs; 2. safety or security needs; 3. social needs; and
4. ego needs. Each of these need levels must be met before higher level needs come into operation. Yet we tend to disregard this rather common sense fact when drawing up our objectives for general education. We assume, across the board, that everyone should be busily self-actualizing, while disregarding the possibility (the likelihood!) that some students may have pressing needs at the level of physiological necessities. More likely, especially with people born to poverty, they are focused at the level of safety or security: simply searching for ways to stabilize his environment and to keep and protect whatever physiological necessities he has. Even more likely, students in the late teens and early twenties are, as at level three, preoccupied with social needs such as for belonging, sharing and association, and for giving and receiving friendship and love. Most likely of all, particularly with the earlier maturation of today's young people, they are relating to ego needs such as self-confidence, independence, achievement, competence, knowledge, status, recognition, appreciation, and respect from one's peers.

Disregarding these obvious facts of life we go right ahead with our high moralizing and poetic appeals to "hyperawareness," buttressing our pedagogy whenever necessary with "sensitivity" sessions and "self-defeating behavior" groups. While the simple fact may be that some people are not ready to be "sensitive" and that they are "defeating" themselves much less than suffering defeats at the hands of faculty who set for them impossible goals. As if people didn't want to "peak out" with genuinely human experiences! I think they do, but there isn't a pedagogy in the world that can facilitate self-actualizing on an empty stomach, amidst a threatening environment, without a minimum of social relatedness, or in the absence of self-esteem and a relatively secure sense of recognition—despite appeals to the contrary by presidents and faculty committees that have forgotten their own adolescence.

One of the most general requirements in a program of general education is, as I see it, a provision for letting people determine their own needs and their own pace of development. How ludicrous is an assumption that we have to guide students toward self-developments at the higher levels. Can we not see that each individual is already "equipped" (something we think we should do for them) with what it takes to engage in self-actualizing; nature has already provided integrations of cognition and emotion and inner-directedness and outer-directedness. Our jobs would be easier if we understood that. What we need to do is to provide whatever resources we can, furnish what insights we can muster, and create opportunities for development (at any level) to occur, and then step aside. A suggestion: Instead of heading our proposals for general education with "A general education should . . .," let us see what happens if we begin, "The most a general
education can accomplish is . . .” In general, let us get off students’ backs with our imposed “needs, ideals and expectations” stemming from “anyone else, any group, or any so-called world.” I will add to this list “or any so-called environment,” which brings me to a second point.

I believe we are long overdue in taking a serious accounting of the rapid rise and spread of operant conditioning. Like any scientific enterprise there is a recognizable contribution that can be made, but the disciples of Behaviorism are going mad with power. It is their good fortune, and our bad, that their modus operandi fits so snugly in the operational, technological, machine-minded ethos of the modern world. They offer a way to do it, and for addicts of so-called social progress, the Siren’s call of their hardware and push-button behavior modification is too much to resist. If there is or should be a pill for every physical ache, it stands to reason, we feel, that any form of unhappiness can be alleviated by depressing an appropriate lever. Plop, into our food cup falls the elixir of life, compliments of the M and M Candy Company.

How serious this affair has grown! The high priest of Behaviorism, B. F. Skinner, in his recent book Beyond Freedom and Dignity, renews his plea for a turning away from the esoteria of values, attitudes, anxieties and all such wishy-wash. We must concern ourselves solely, he says, with changing the environment in such ways that we bring behavior under control. Now, this is a remarkable statement for anyone to make, especially one who, unless I misread him, intends to change our attitudes about thinking that attitudes are worthy of attention. Perhaps, Professor Skinner understands, despite himself, that there is something to be accomplished prior to launching a program that will program society. Namely, he must bring others around to his point of view and, with that, he is flirting with heresy; that is, if it is possible for divinity to offend itself. And, by the way, I do not choose to be ensnared by that old Behaviorist catch-all, that the book itself, like all books, is effective through some ill-defined series of reinforcements transpiring between reader and printed page and, therefore, does not qualify as attitude changing. The plain fact is that Skinner, like all conditioners, realizes that there is something about behavior that is prior to its outer manifestations, namely, a certain activation functioning, as Campbell puts it, “through appropriate influences from without, but then a response in terms of one’s readiness and pace of growth . . .”

One of the best features of Behaviorism has been its exorcism of the term “mind” from scientific vocabulary; that is, in the sense in which it is usually taken as a substance or entity residing somewhere within. Once a mind/matter dualism is posited, science is led to a sense of dead ends, having as its final reward a reiteration of those very con-
cepts which have always stood in the way of intellectual progress. As A. F. Bently put it:

Consider a definition by which consciousness is made to be a unique relation which may maintain on occasion between a living organism and its world. So far as the words go, they keep the organism and the world separate, posit a relation, and place this in a series of relations, making it "unique" with respect to all others of the series. Each of those words has a huge background of possible shadings of meaning. And yet, no matter how we crystallize each of them, the one most probable remark about consciousness is that it is that aspect of experience in which there is a comprehensiveness of organism and world and relationship; that is, *in which these words have broken down entirely. And further it is only on the basis of these words that a uniqueness can be asserted*. [Italics mine].

The point is, that as Behaviorism has succeeded in shifting attention away from a "mind" that has "a huge background of possible shades of meaning," it has managed to transfer *in total* all the ambiguities to an equally uncertain domain called "environment;" a domain that Behaviorists would have us rationally order for the reason that human beings are nothing but animals determind by and responding to their "environment." All right, which one? And where is it? Behaviorism's most significant contribution to date would be to answer these most perplexing questions.

As Arthur Koestler notes in his book, *The Ghost in the Machine*, "environment" is as much determined by the state of the organism as by the setting in which behavior is occurring. Of particular concern, Koestler says, are those occasions where skilled (operantly conditioned) behaviors break down because of a sudden shift in what is "environment" to the organism.

... a changing, variable environment demands flexible behavior, and reverses the trend towards mechanization ... the challenge of the environment can exceed a critical limit where it can no longer be met by skilled routine, however flexible—because the customary "rules of the game" are no longer adequate to cope with the situation. Then a crisis arises. The outcome is either a breakdown of behavior—"when in danger or in doubt, run in circles, scream and shout," [or] the sudden emergence of *new* forms of behavior, of original solutions ...9

How many environments can we enumerate that become, at various times, a relevant matrix within which behavior occurs? I may find my body embedded within a perfectly controlled environment which Behaviorists will mold for me, but *my environment of most critical importance may be imagination*: projecting a course of action for a
setting and situation to be encountered not here and now, but to­mor­row or ten years from now. And what of behavior that occurs, as it were, in a "social environment" where, according to Behaviorists prin­ciples, the controlling features of environment are not now inert things, but other people? In this instance, how am I to be trained to respond to an "environment" that, supposedly, will have been trained to re­spond to me? Clearly, this leads to a series of absurd regressions where controller and controlled dance first in one pair of shoes, then another. A consequence of assigning technical competence the primary role in determining adequacies in social relations is, as Elton Mayo points out, a clear and present danger:

Our theory of civilization acts on the assumption that if technical and material advancement is maintained, human coopera­tion will somehow be inevitable. . . . Social life resembles bio­logical in at least one aspect; when normal processes cease pathological growth begins . . . as a consequence we are techn­ically competent as no other age in history has been; and we combine this with utter social incompetence.10

Which leads to this: The contributions of Behaviorism should be clearly defined within a definite context, one that clearly allows for its own inherent limitations and excludes from its field of application all phenomena which cannot reasonably be expected to remain in­variant, day to day. This means that operant conditioning will con­tribute the most when it delineates its field of relevance: a field, it will be seen, that is considerably more narrow than the aspirations of its most enthusiastic devotees.

As hard as it may be to swallow, the greatest service we can per­form as educators is to leave room for a vacuum in the lives of stu­dents: a vacuum that “nature abhors.” Whatever enters this space will be of the individuals’ liking, not necessarily ours. We provide some resources and whatever opportunities we can, but then we must respect the principle of fermentation in accord with one’s own orgasmic­environmental tempo.

Can we now see yet another dimension to the wit of Mulla Nasrudin? That the grammar of the day may not save us during especially crucial moments. Can we also see that this reference to grammar is an anagogical device representing the larger vicissitudes of life; that is, the various “topics” and “phrases” that cluster around life and shroud it with apparently, but only apparently, vital meanings. As Ortega y Gasset explains:

A topic is an idea that is used, not because it is evident, but be­cause people say it. A phrase is that which is not thought out every time, but is simply said, repeated . . .11
I think that by now my meaning is coming through: that our concern for reforms or innovations in education can become cantankerously ensnared in the grammar of the day—the various topics and phrases. What we really need to learn is how to swim. And that, as I have said, involves attention to an aspect of our existence that has a logic of its own, not one imposed within the structures of the classroom. The non-swimmer is one who spends the greater part of his time bobbing upon the surface in the frailest of crafts. He understands only the shallowest meaning of himself. As Gasset goes on to say:

His individual, effective and always more primitive “I” is replaced by the “I” which is “people,” by the conventional, complicated, cultivated “I.”

Small wonder that so many of today’s youth are, as one says, “messed up.” For in refusing to accept parental definitions of the good life, they have nevertheless not discovered, no doubt for having never been told, that the self with which they confront society’s evils is the same complicated “I” that society structures and maintains. As Zen Buddhists say, one cannot wipe off blood with blood. The very real frustrations experienced by these youth are, in part, traceable directly to us for having failed in our responsibility to educate. That is, society’s refusal to respond is the other aspect of our refusal to see through the complicated “I”: a refusal to deal with life in terms other than those which the conventional understanding of ourselves dictates, and an unwillingness to see as partly “in here” problems we naively insist are totally “out there,” and vice versa.

In a similar way, our universities (centers, it is said, for our best thinking) test one reform then another, retreading, for God knows how long, the outworn and wornout “topics” and “phrases” of progressive education. In their zeal to get on with it, few stop to consider that idleness, non-activity, isolation, and separation are essential to inner development to no less extent than planning, movement, involvement, and integration are to the outer forms of civilization. Herein, we should note, lies a key to a revolution, not a reform, that can set education to new directions. Intuitively, our students often seem to understand principles of inactivity better than we, but they are forced to work within assumptive frameworks of the operational modes we help to maintain. Consequently, we see them, in frustration, trying to fit operational modes to purposes that can be served only by activity, separation, pre-occupation with oneself, and hermetic working-through. In exasperation they flirt with occultisms, witchcraft, organic body-cults, nature worship, revolutionary utopianisms, and all manners of operational schemes intended to reach a portion of themselves which is, paradoxically, beyond the reach of anything grammar can do.
to see through itself. What they want, and what we could help to pro-
vide, is a taste for a different kind of pi, which the punster might see
to mean a different constant used in surveying the outer dimensions
defining that lie, as the ancients put it, with the center everywhere
and the circumference nowhere.

There is yet another sense in which all of this can be taken. I refer
now to some ideas put forth by Thomas Szasz in his controversial book
*The Myth of Mental Illness*, wherein he examines the nature of what
is commonly called illnesses of the mind. Szasz suggests the intriguing
possibility that illness stems from a failure on a person's part to find,
as he says, a game worth playing. Assuming that Szasz is on to some-
thing, I should like to direct attention to a very clumsy and self-defeat-
ing game we are still trying to play, even though we know enough to
know better. The rule of this game is to play as if the individual can
amount to something only to the degree that a vague and lifeless
dentity called society approaches some sort of ideal condition. Even
more ruthlessly, we are told, and then we tell others, that nothing
could be more gratifying, and significant of a life well-lived, than to
devote oneself to the betterment of that bloodless abstraction. I will
not deny that working through and with others is a necessary and re-
warding experience, after all I am a teacher; but to dedicate all or
even a major portion of oneself to goals having a strictly social con-
text is to ignore extremely important activities that are completely
private. One of these is the dream life of the individual, that totally
inaccessible inner realm that can become socially manifested only by
producing communicable symbols; but then the symbol is not the thing
represented, only a facsimile. The dream itself remains absolutely
private.

To ask that a person become fully engaged in the collective dream,
that system of shared symbols called cultural values, goals, and ex-
pectations, is to ask that he deny his inner world: the *vas hermeticum*
in which, from time immemorial, has brewed the creative spirit and the
self-transcending hero who lifts himself to a higher plane of awareness
and integration. The more we insist that individual worth be estab-
lished on the basis of social progress, i.e., changes that can be verified
through observation and measurement and which bring society closer
to approximation of an ideal condition, the more we find ourselves
pursuing an illusory utopia whose wholeness we believe will signal the
wholeness of the individual. This is sheer folly and must be classified
among the games not worth playing.

Unfortunately, we not only play it, we play it to the hilt. It is
precisely here that our projects for a humane and self-fulfilling educa-
tion go wrong. However well-intentioned, admonishments to collectiv-
ize our lives and to find one's greater purposes and meanings in the
service of God, country, other people, or what not, can be invitations to

130
spiritual anguish. A principal difference about today’s young people is their discovery of this inward impoverishment at an earlier age than we. This is the real thrust, as I see it, behind the driving need to “do one’s own thing” or to “blow one’s mind.” We should and must see in this a clear indication of disservice to a genuine human prosperity: the need to grow and evolve in cooperation with a part of our nature that has a logic different from the categories of the intellect.

One consequence of the frustration is an attempt to regress: to drop out, get back to nature, restore a condition of primitive innocence or some such, and we see this occurring. Can we understand, however, the irony that solutions of this sort are still overdetermined by and ensnared within the primarily operational mode of living? What regressors fail to see is that the problems are not so much the consequences of the operational mode as the operational mode itself. Attempting to regress, therefore, is to repeat the same mistake in a different direction. Any thought that the good life follows on the heels of obliterating science, business, and technology (those arch-enemies of human nature) errs by assuming that outward manipulations can lead to inner peace and harmony. I cannot see how this assumption differs from the world views of those “others” known as the establishment.

Self-transcendence and striving for inner balance and wholeness are not realized by regaining lost innocence, going back to nature, or even a coming home in some Biblical sense. The innocence, if we can call it that, of self-actualizing man resides in a balancing of intellect and operationalisms on the one hand, with profound perceptions and intuitive understandings on the other; and this means going forward, not backward. Is it not a fundamental fact of evolution generally, that the interplay between organism and environment is complete? As the organism evolves so does environment. An organism attempting to regress to an earlier evolutionary stage in the face of environmental problems creates his own alienation, which is to say, he no longer fits the present environment. In turn, alienation itself now becomes a problem with a consequent effort, perhaps, to regress even more. Cyberneticists call this a positive feedback loop: actions intended to solve a problem worsen it only to call forth additional faulty actions. This is thoroughly neurotic behavior.

This is not to say, however, that regression cannot be employed in a creative way; that is, as long as it becomes not an end in itself, but a prelude to an innovative advance. Arthur Koestler calls this a strategy of “reculer pour mieux sauter”—of drawing back to leap.

The essence of the process which I have described [says Koestler] is an evolutionary retreat from specialized adult forms of bodily structure and behaviour, to an earlier or more primitive, but also more plastic and less committed stage—followed by a
sudden advance in a new direction. It is as if the stream of life had momentarily reversed its course, flowing uphill for awhile, then opened up in a new stream bed . . . this is a favorable gambit in the grand strategy of the evolutionary process; and it also plays an important role in the progress of science and art.14

Now let us come back full circle to the concept of “hermetic pedagogy.” It will be recalled that the Greek god Hermes was a guide or conductor of souls to the underworld. (Incidentally, I find it interesting that winged-footed Mercury is still among us as the logo for Florists Transworld Delivery, a super-network of businesses that rely heavily upon the death industry.) The *vas hermeticum* is to be associated then with a form of dying; a process of *nigredo* as alchemists called it, where base elements are destroyed, giving rise to a new form: the *filus philosophorum*, through which one attains the Philosophers’ stone. In our present terminology, it is a drawing back to leap, to achieve a transformation, *not* to resume the character of baser elements. A psychological term for this is *metanoia*. Once again, the temporary regression requires a sealing-off from outward time and an inward-turning to inward time, followed by a leaping forward in terms of one’s readiness and pace of growth.

Many young people today seem to understand only half of this progress, the *nigredo*, which they take to be the final goal. As justification they point to the Oriental hermit who forsakes the world for the “forest years” whereby he will attain *Moksha*, or final release in a total oblivion of ego. What they fail to understand is that the most beloved character of the East is not the hermit, but the Boddhisattva, one who returns to the world to live, love and teach among all others.

Accordingly, my recommendations are not to be taken as meaning there is nothing the educator can or should do. It is our function to provide those influences from without, but then to know when enough is enough. The greater danger is not that we might do too little, but that we do too much. In fact, I sometimes wonder if concern over including affective experiences in education is a veiled form of saying we are looking for ways to *motivate* students? To keep them active at a level concomitant with all we wish to teach them. This is where we must check our enthusiasms. We carry out our function, as we should, of providing resources and whatever insights we can manage; but then we come off it with our moralizing, petty reinforcements, allusions to various abstract ideals, and then *grading*, of all things, in accordance with success in, as we say, coming to “grips” with the subject matter. As if things weren’t bad enough, *now* we want to integrate cognition and emotion!—right there in the halls of an institution that has
already replaced most of man's inner life with the unattainable values of a collective ideal.

We can begin moving in new directions by performing an action that is long overdue: abolish grading. As Bertrand Russell once said of Christianity, can anything that requires for its preservation an endless series of apologetics and reforms really be worth saving. Assessment of competency in some areas requiring a high degree of skill is no doubt necessary. Frankly, I would prefer that any brain surgeon of mine be a straight "A" student. But there is no reason whatsoever for testing and grading in that area loosely called general education. With what audacity can we judge individual processes of growth, expanding awareness, and self-actualizing? For my part, in a senior seminar I teach, I have begun a policy of issuing everybody an "A" on the first day of class: a policy that will continue until grading is discontinued or I am relieved of my job. However, one often hears arguments concerning difficulties posed for transfer students when grading is not used. This existentially tragic situation I consign to the genius of those in administration who love nothing so well as a good problem over which they can wring their hands. Suffice it to say, in the matter of grading, here is one small step that can be taken in the way of leaving people alone.

Next, let us pay our due respects to the operant conditioners who probably know more about skill acquisition than anyone else. But let us not pretend that creativity, imagination, intuitive richness, instinctual delights, and the other oh-so-human characteristics of humans are nothing more than inculcated reactions to so-called environment. And let us not take their ability to get results to mean getting results that are always in our best interest.

Lest I appear prejudiced, let me further suggest a partial dismantling of all disciplines which have served more to disintegrate than integrate students and faculty alike. Whenever possible, students should be afforded an opportunity for exploring important questions, mostly their questions, aided by a multiplicity of perspectives which faculty from their individual specializations can offer. In practical terms this can mean a form of team teaching. Those who have not experienced it will be surprised at the ways in which topics receive illumination from hitherto unsuspected directions. One can cultivate a taste for playing with metaphors this way, and he can find that they open new perspectives on matters he had thought were foregone conclusions.

One suggestion I do not intend to be taken lightly is that we begin to counsel some students away from college. We all know that higher education has become, for most, something that one does simply because he has graduated from high school. This is a waste of everyone's time and a very real threat to the well-being of the student. As mentioned previously, it is at this age when, more than anything, a person
might need a degree of privacy and "outward turning of ears, eyes, and heart to the mysteries of life and the universe." During this time he may even discover a number of important questions which may later bring him to our doorsteps in search of answers. In this sense it really doesn't matter whether the freshman is teenaged, in his 30's, or even in his 70's.

Finally, in the matter of educating the emotions, I hope we can see that it is more a question of standing aside than of contrived intervention. Few could have a more vital interest in this affair than psychotherapists; yet, research indicates again and again that effective therapy depends more upon the personality of the practitioner and the empathic relationship than upon the particular theoretical persuasion of the therapist. What wonders can transpire if we just cease deviling people with one or another criterion of performance. Can we not understand as the ancient alchemists did, that recipes of transmutation represent Man's intervention in the processes of nature; that "in taking upon himself the responsibility of changing Nature, Man [puts] . . . himself in the place of time . . ."16

One might notice at this point a contradiction in my analogy. Namely, that the alchemist did intervene in time, whereas I am asking that we devalue intervention. The difference is this: whereas the alchemist, like the Oriental mystic, operates within the structure of fixed procedures and a clearly defined common goal, people of the West have no collective theology, cosmology, mythology, or even socio-political sentiment to guide individuals toward any "ultimate realization." Accordingly, we can not assure the existence of generally appropriate times for intervention, (i.e., a psychologically "ripe" period,) much less an end product that will shine with the same luminosity as the ubiquitous alchemists' gold.

While avoiding the kinds of harmful intercessions I have been discussing, there are, nevertheless some "influences from without" that can act as catalysts for inner fermentation. For one thing, we should encourage the use of all of a person's senses in exploring himself and the world. Our education is much too oriented toward what can be either seen or heard. It should be noted that these are sensory modalities which involve distal stimulations: information concerning objects and events kept at a certain distance. We would do well thinking of ways to include the other senses such as touch, smell, taste, pressure, proprioception, temperature, and so on. Whereas the former tend to maintain the world in abstract, i.e., through use of symbols, the latter bring experience close to the "raw," where knowing is less a matter of formulation and analysis than it is a feeling in one's gut. "Topics" and "phrases" are of no use in these experiences and the individual must look to other means of knowing, perhaps in the Biblical sense of a person "knowing" his lover. Here again the team teaching approach
can help, for this is the realm of the arts. Where the scientist leaves off, the sculptor takes over. Or is it the other way around? Those who team teach know the importance of this question.

Additionally, we can rebel against the way in which our bodies have been politicized. And a feudal structure at that! We have subjected certain regions of the body to the servitude of others until we are chopped up, much as Marshall McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride.* In the same way that we invest the eyes and ears with a larger portion of "reality," we exile sensuality and eroticism to the remote zones of the sexual organs. As an old professor of mine once said, "why so? it's all the same nervous system!" Add to this psychosomatic fragmentation Freud's principle of projection and what we have is the person who can find no way to self-fulfillment except through promoting the utopian democracy: an overthrowing of that feudalistic and tyrannical system "out there." What he wants is unity and assimilation all right, but in himself, at that center of experiences where he senses everything is wrong. All efforts to obtain total organismic involvement through an exaggerated exercise of isolated erotic zones, however, leads to a painful repetition compulsion. Is it possible, we might ask, that the person like ourselves, who eats while he reads, while he watches TV, while he smokes, while he talks with a friend is engaging in perverted body eroticism? That he tries to produce in an additive way a unified experience? Like any good bureaucrat, he thinks that an optimal functioning of each unit will provide the ultimate institution.

Here is where we can help our students: by ceasing to pretend that our sex education classes and various hygiene courses are really what they need and want. What they want is to learn how to live, which as I have indicated earlier may be a matter of unlearning much of what they have been taught: to shake loose of the *operational mode.*

Possibly most important of all, we should respect free-wheeling imagination, fantasy, speculation, exploration, and any and all attempts to bring oneself in accord with what has been called the *Mysterium Tremendum:* a sense of awe over the miracle that every thing which is, is *at all.* Compared with that mystery all the manifesting virgins and bleeding palms in the world are reduced to freak shows on a midway. We can encourage this endless search through the miracle of life by letting people know we respect their dreams. Again, a large part of this can be accomplished by ceasing to impose our own standards (are they our own?) upon them. How often, for example, have we said "that's an irresponsible statement!"; "that's not a fact, it's fancy!"; "can you demonstrate a proof of that!"; or some similar insult intended—and I hope you catch the meaning—to shape them up.

It is true that all this may be taken as a recommendation regarding what is "good" for people, i.e., a set of ideals imposed from without. The difference, however, is my insistence that what is largely in a per-
son's best interest is an opportunity—afforded him to view his own needs, wants, wishes, dreams, loves, fears, and conflicts as legitimate: perfectly natural organism-environment transactions that are focused at that experiential position he calls "I." An unrelenting input of expectations and ideals totally from without can desensitize that "I," leading to a burden of frustration and guilt one can never escape because there is no way he can abandon himself. To repeat (because it is so important), even our most altruistic efforts to provide for the welfare of another can become additional strains upon an already over-stressed individual who has learned to regret his personal deficiencies in regard to a collective idea. This is "Mr. Americanism," where the notion of self-perfection is defined as approximation to an image, but the emerging heroes of today are not muscle-bound as much as bounded in abstractions. Their god-like qualities shine not in oiled-muscle, but in "perfected character." They are gurus, preacher-poets, self-styled avatars, ego-tripping-egoless-Buddhas, revolutionary quacks and society-repressed professors who could lead us upward and onward save for the restraints of the unenlightened masses.

The creative mind [says Koestler] perceives things in a new light, the snob in a borrowed light; his pursuits are sterile, and his satisfactions of a vicarious nature. He does not aim at power; he merely wants to rub shoulders with those who wield power, and bask in their reflected glory. What he admires in public would bore him when alone, but he is unaware of it. When he reads Kirkegaard, he is not moved by what he reads, he is moved by himself reading Kirkegaard but he is blissfully unaware of it. His emotions do not derive from the object, but from extraneous sources associated with it; his satisfactions are pseudo-satisfactions, his triumphs are self-delusions...18

This is why I have suggested that we begin our proposals for a general education with "The most a general education can accomplish is..." We can never completely avoid an imposition of ideals for the reason that things are affirmed even through their negation, but in relative terms it is possible to develop goals that are "better" in regard to respecting individual differences. This means a devaluation of criteria for performance, formulated as ideals, stemming from committee members who probably know even less about students than about each other.

What, we ask, can this mean for a general education? To answer this we must first ask what is general about human existence that requires understanding, working through, and internationalization. Said another way, is it possible that the fully human experience is nourished upon perennial understandings in much the same way that the body
maintains wholeness to the degree that essential nutritional substances are available in minimum supply? This would mean searching for unmistakable commonalities in experience that form, as it were, the vitamins of existential health. This sort of approach at least turns proposal writing efforts away from the various “topics” and “phrases” of the day, as seen in a current sado-masochistic tendency to view general education as an integration of different disciplines, and toward matters concerning recurring issues about which disciplinary knowledge may or may not provide relevant insights. What a relief this would be!

As examples, two clearly recognizable perennial aspects of experience are birth and death. We do a miserable service to understanding birth in our sex education courses and when it comes to death we have nothing to say. It is ignored. It is something a person simply awaits, no doubt in a geriatrics unit conveniently out of sight and mind. At that critical moment when life is about to slip away we leave the dying with little more than sentiments of a clergymen who knows a lot about death, but nothing about dying. How much more problematic (and tragic!) our ignorance becomes when we fail to cast birth-death into a psycho-mythological framework. That is, understanding a principle of appearance-disappearance-renewal that may well be a “constant” in nature’s processes: a principle understood by “primitives,” but considered unscientific for that reason.

Another constant in experience appears to be a need to participate in the sense of a suspension of one’s usual orientation to identity as a concrete, isolated island of certainty in the midst of an uncertain universe. In the words of Lévy-Bruhl:

The need of participation remains something more imperious and intense, even among people like ourselves [italics mine]. than the thirst for knowledge and the desire for conformity with the claims of reason. It lies deeper in us and its source is more remote.19

It is evident that this principle is widely misunderstood. Taken in its popular form, it means that discussion groups, per se, are desirable because they encourage “participation.” Yet, the way in which one participates is carefully scrutinized, in the case of “sensitivity” groups, by other participants who will see to it that an individual learns to open up in accordance with a collective standard. The problem is indeed in communication, but rather in the sense of self-forgetting, not in the popular sense of mouthing right-sounding “topics” and “phrases” which are sure signs of the self-conscious person.

It is important to understand that participation, in the large sense in which I use it, cannot be taught. All that one can do is point in various directions, designate opportunities, and legitimize the effort.
Some of the more useful pointers or aids will come from the art forms for self-transcendent experiences. If educators are truly serious about learning experiences which include both cognitive and affective aspects, then collaboration with the artist is indispensable. Of course, this will require humility on the part of scientist-types: an admission that their grammar has limited application and that many of the different aspects of working with emotion that they encounter have been solved in the arts a long time ago. A closely related enterprise would be the legitimizing of manual labor. The idea being that a life lived too much in the abstract—as many professors realize—is an unearthly existence. There is no reason whatsoever for requiring students to become intellectual hermits for four years. Without active work with the hands or some other form of "relief" from textbooks and lectures, life becomes schizoid and unbearably drab. Various outward bound programs are probably a step in a better direction, but most instructors view them with suspicion, as a waste of time, or as neglecting serious study for irresponsible gallivanting about.

The most interesting (and controversial) recommendation of all concerns the use of esoteric means toward participation. I think there is much to be learned about the benefits of meditation, ritual, sensory expansion, and drugs in pointing toward new understandings. In so far as none of these are viewed as ends in themselves they can provide a certain shock effect indicating that alternative modes of awareness are possible. Our usual inability to see something other than the familiar is the largest barrier to exploring other types of understandings that may require radical (i.e., fundamental) changes in perception. Otherwise, every attempt to discover difference turns out to be sameness with a new hat. Moreover, and I wish to emphasize this, unless we get into this business people will continue to do it on their own. We must take Lévy-Bruhl seriously concerning the deep-rootedness of a need to participate. Unless we legitimize self-transcendence, participation, mind expansion or whatever other name it goes by, and provide opportunities for sensible experimentation into alternative modes of perception and feeling, people will undertake their own "trips": unsupervised, amateurish, and laden with all the hideous dangers we are now seeing in the rapid spread of addiction. All of the fancy drug education programs in the world, no matter how well financed and staffed, will not meet a need that lies in a totally different qualitative dimension.

Additionally, what provisions have been made in higher education for legitimizing and facilitating curiosity and a sense of awe and wonder? For the most part, these are treated as forms of "motivation" which students are expected to display in response to a predetermined academic format. One should be awestruck, we say, by the beauties of theoretical models, intersecting functions, prepared by others. Appar-
ently, we have not understood that wonder and curiosity are fickle companions for another person’s insights; that these are the ingredients of one’s own acts of discovery and creativity which can and do atrophy if not exercised. Again, the most educators can do to encourage awe, wonder, and a playing out of curiosity is to provide occasions and opportunities. Accordingly, one of the most appropriate resources for accomplishing this is found in speculation.

By definition, speculation is concerned with possibilities which may have not one, but many modes of actualization. It is away from the sphere of ready-made answers that people find some elbow room; where education and educators have not foreclosed upon where imagination can lead. The student’s imagination. In short, we create some opportunities for people to engage in legitimized (because recognized and encouraged), zany thinking and feeling. We should just look at the unlimited number of universes of discourse available for far-out speculation! The sciences and science fiction, parapsychology, eugenics, bioelectronic feedback, metaphysics of several varieties, synthesized music, urban planning (!), international politics, and on and on. All containing a lunatic fringe of speculation which, by now, we should have learned to regard more politely and with considerably less skepticism. Herein lies general education, where today’s over-generalizations are often tomorrow’s understatements.

Throughout, I have attempted to promote the feeling of a certain direction in which we can move in education. To the few proposals I have mentioned I am certain many more creative ideas can be added. The important underlying theme is that we begin with the requirements of the individual, not the imposed ideals and standards of any collectivity. We must bring to bear all of our scholarship and talents to discover what is general about human experience and then adjust our pedagogy to those universal rhythms, in the same way that we will save our environment only when we respect its systemic logic and then adjust technology to the warp and woof of its natural processes. Anything else is grammar. It is the forebrain, drunk with power and disrupting other organismic centers in an attempt to impose its own demands on theirs. Success at one level is defeat at another.

To end one’s remarks with a quote is to say, all at once, what had been attempted during the previous myriads of words. Which means either that more was said than necessary, in which case the quote would have sufficed, or that not enough was said, which the quote is now intended to remedy. Nevertheless:

A ship seemed about to sink, and the passengers were on their knees praying and repenting, promising to make all kinds of amends if only they could be saved. Only Mulla Nasrudin was unmoved. Suddenly in the midst of the panic he leaped up and
shouted, "steady, now, friends! Don't change your ways—don't be too prodigal. I think I see land."

NOTES

3. Ibid., p. 374.
4. Ibid., pp. 374-375.
12. Ibid.