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On Tracking That Rarest of Breeds,
The New Humanities Teacher

BY BRYAN LINDSAY

Looking back on all my years as a teacher and trying to identify the most frequently asked question concerning my style in the classroom, I keep coming up with a very simple “how do you manage to get yourself up to that level day after day?” And unfortunately I have no real answer to that question. Perhaps an anecdote from my young manhood will point to a response.

Common to the town squares of rural Alabama in years past were the itinerant evangelical preachers who came to town to save the town and set about their work with a gusto unusual across the otherwise lethargic South. And my friends and I, as sophisticated young agnostics and atheists were wont to do in those days, would go down to the square when the traveling preacher was in town and attempt to heckle him for his earnest attempts at spreading the gospel. Not wanting to raise the hackles of the true believers around us, however, we were forced to develop highly esoteric taunts that were so “inside” that they made no sense to the intensely involved bystanders. Also we would sometimes attempt to outshout and outsin the impromptu congregation itself, finding some sort of sick humor in this pedestrian form of worship.

So it was that when the “preacher in the cage” came to the town square we could hardly contain ourselves. His testimony, as he paced back and forth behind his four barred walls, was that his witness had ben so dynamic in some town that the townspeople had required the high sheriff to lock him up. There in that jail cell he had continued to preach, through the doors into the cellblock, out the cell window,
to anyone who came within earshot, and to his amazement he discovered that he had much more impact from behind bars than he enjoyed on his soapbox down at the corner. As a result he had built himself a cart with a replica of his jail cell on it, and he used this as a living (so to speak) audio-visual aid. And on this evening, as he ranted on about the meaning of the cell, and the symbolism of this event in his past, we found ourselves gleefully "amening" him with more and more fervor, until those more pious souls around us grew quiet and embarrassed with their own feeble efforts. And we, as insensitive young men are known to do, redoubled our efforts until we were almost beside ourselves.

Then a strange hush fell over the entire assembly and we turned from ourselves and our satirical merriment directly into the joyful eyes of the evangelist. Standing there with the sweat streaming down his face he looked me square in the eye and said, "Thank you, brother, thank you. Sayin' 'Amen' to me is just like sayin' 'sic 'em' to a dog!" I will never forget the moment or that preacher's eyes.

So I use this anecdote as an answer, simply substituting "teach" for "Amen." There is simply something so exciting, so dynamic, so alive about a classroom full of beautiful children (and this range covers the gamut from six to twenty-one, as far as I'm concerned) that I cannot wait to get in there and begin my own peculiar form of witness. I guess I might even go so far as to call the classroom my cage, because I really have come to discover my most internal self there, just as my friend the roving preacher did.

And this *entre* should give the reader a fairly good insight as to the prerequisites for teaching the new humanities, because it is my firm contention that it takes a very special breed of teacher to accept the responsibility for this sort of educational activity. I should state here, as I have stated elsewhere, that I do not like the word teacher; I don't even know whether I like the word professor. My favorite word is educator, but it has gotten so screwed up at the hands of the educationists that I am frequently afraid to use it in mixed company. Nonetheless it does serve my purpose best, because I look at myself as a guide, one who leads *through* (and eventually *out of*, if everything goes well) and I introduce myself to my charges (or students, if you wish) as one who is simply older and therefore more experienced in the business of discovery. Discovery is a key word, also, because that is what so much of the new humanities is about: first self-discovery, then the discovery of one's fellow man.

Perhaps, then, a clarification of what is meant by the "new" humanities is in order. First, the new humanities differs from the traditional humanities in the methodology used: while traditionalists appear to be predominantly content-oriented, looking at the various media (music, art, literature, philosophy, et al) as ends in themselves, the new humanities people are predominantly process oriented, using
the media as vehicles for exploring the subjective consciousness of the student and the faculty member as they experience those monuments to significant human experience which are the content of the humanities. Secondly, the new humanists deal more frequently with the affective realm of perception than do the old hats, although much time is spent processing affective responses through a cognitive filtering system in order to arrive at a comprehensive set of values. Values. Perhaps this is the most critical difference between the two styles, because the new humanist is primarily dedicated to the task of equipping his charges with the tools for developing their own mature value systems instead of absorbing *ad nauseam* then puking back a la Pavlov the various introjected value systems which American education has traditionally attempted to force on its nurselings. Education in a self-enhancing and life-enhancing manner rather than indoctrination for a cog's role in the corporate state, that is the task the new humanists set for themselves.

But let's get back to the main topic: identifying the new humanities teacher and those characteristics which mark him as the "preacher in the cage." As a good pedagogical writer should, I have developed these in two sets of categories, the Four C's, and the Three E's.

**Competence**

Even though the new humanities teacher will be teaching the interrelated humanities, consisting of a variety of media and a variety of "disciplines" (in the traditional sense of the word), the teacher should enjoy a high level of success in at least one area of specialization. This success, with its very sweet smell, in an initial area of competence will spill over into the surrounding areas of activity and increase the possibilities for success there. Most of the successful teachers in the new humanities today have come to this discipline from one of the allied disciplines, with English as the most popular. While I am speculating here I would venture to say that much of this conversion is due to the fact that many English programs are just too sterile and unexciting for the truly creative teacher. We will discuss creativity later, but it does deserve some mention here. Competence breeds success and creates a hunger for continued success; competence in one area under the humanities umbrella will most likely breed competence in the allied areas. And competence as an educator is an undeniable prerequisite for the instructor in the new humanities; we have too great a battle to fight to allow incompetents in our ranks.

Incompetence is a very serious concern, however; because whenever a program as innovative and experimental as this one comes into the curriculum it always attracts certain members of the "lunatic fringe," and the neighborhood "bleeding hearts" seem to gravitate
toward these sensitivity-oriented activities. I first discovered this the summer I was awarded an NDEA Fellowship to attend an institute in Guidance and Counseling. Never have I been so surrounded with neurotics, malcontents, do-gooders, and the other assorted flora and fauna of the educational swamp! And if this offends my brothers who are making it successfully as guidance people and as counselors, I would simply apologize by saying that this was my experience at the beginning of the movement. Movements have a way of purging themselves of impurities as they grow and nurture their best elements; I am saying that the new humanities must be on guard against this sort of infiltration from the onset. If education itself had developed a martinet posture at its beginning, it would not be so screwed up today! And so I hoist the standard of EXCELLENCE here, and before it I prepare to do battle. I have no need of the drifting teacher who has never been able to make it anywhere in the curriculum and who now finds the new humanities "exactly what I've been looking for all these years!" Likely that teacher will screw this one up just like he's screwed up all the others, but with a serious exception: he will have screwed up the entire concept in the eyes of the administration and his fellow teachers at the same time, and the new humanities will be relegated to that large kookery jar of educational mistakes up on the top shelf of the schoolhouse pantry and well out of the reach of those beautiful hungry students. Rather give me the brilliant choral director, the really exciting drama coach, that dedicated person who enjoys long and meaningful conversations with Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and Hemingway every afternoon at 2:10, the art teacher who continues to paint, those really healthy members of the educational community who expect to succeed, and I'll give you new humanities programs that will flourish.

**Commitment**

Commitment—what a word! The story about the chicken and the pig passing the restaurant comes immediately to mind. There on the window was a large sign: HAM AND EGGS—80c. The chicken considered the sign and clucked with satisfaction, saying, "There! See what a significant contribution we make." To which the pig replies, "Sure, for you it's a contribution, but for me it represents total commitment!" And that is really where it's at. If the teacher isn't totally committed to educational excellence, he doesn't have any place in the schools and he certainly doesn't have any place in the new humanities. I go back to my preacher and his cage: it was his eyes that converted me. Today, when I find myself in rap sessions with my students, it is their eyes that really tell me what I want to know about them; and it is the eyes of my colleagues that tell me what I want to know about them. Have you ever taken the time to check and see how
many teachers never look their students in the eye? This may sound hokey, but I find a great deal of meaning here. Because I know that if I can't look my fellow man in the eye then there's something wrong within me. It's not within him, unless I discover that he can't look me in the eye. And again I find the meaning of commitment at the heart of this analogy: the teacher in the new humanities must be able to look himself in the eye, then he must be able to look his students in the eye, and then they together must be able to look the system in the eye as they defend their position and their actions in the face of the traditional distrust and suspicion with which the educational establishment views all new programs. Commitment begins with the discipline. The teacher in the new humanities must really feel that there is an essential need for this program within the contemporary curriculum. While it is frequently experimental it is not simply another experiment. It attempts to meet student needs that are not met anywhere else. If the teacher feels that these needs are not the concern of the schools and colleges then he certainly shouldn't be involved with the new humanities. Concern is the next commitment which we will examine but let us resolve this business of commitment here.

Commitment begins with the profession of education, not as some sort of vested interest but as a true calling. Remember the preacher in the cage. Then commitment is to the discipline, the new humanities. If the work of the new humanities can be done in the other disciplines, then there is no need for the new humanities. But if the teacher feels that the new humanities is really the key to a whole new realm of significant experiences that are not being provided by the traditional disciplines then he belongs neck deep in the new humanities. Next comes commitment to the students, which requires that the teacher's particular pleasures and prejudices be surrendered in favor of those interests which have real relevance for the students. The teacher must exercise some judgement, obviously, but he must be committed at all times to the betterment of his charges. Once these three commitments are vitalized the final commitment is to the enrichment of everything else humane, as far as the teacher's reach can extend. It becomes rhetoric to project cosmic implications with regard to the new humanities; if, after several years, the school itself seems enriched by the presence of the program, then a great deal of good has been done. To paraphrase a well-greased homily: commitment begins at home.

Concern

There's not a great deal to say about concern, because it has been alluded to frequently above. Concern centers on the student, or perhaps it is better to say, on the individual student, with the accent on individual. This requires a great deal of freedom and flexibility on the
part of the teacher, and this will be discussed next, under the sub-topic *creativity*. Let us say simply that the well-being of the student is the primary reason for implementing these programs. Within the framework of the new humanities the student should be allowed ample space and time to begin the exciting process of self-discovery, and this in turn requires a less than rigid course outline and lesson plan coupled with an amazing amount of scope on the part of the teacher. If the spectre of "looseness" begins again to rear its ugly head, simply refer to the section on *commitment* above. The dedicated teacher will not allow his program to become *meaningless* in the name of *relevance* and *significance*. He will simply work harder and longer to provide truly significant experiences for a wide range of personalities and interests. This is the meaning of concern.

Creativity

The most needed teacher in the new humanities is the *creative teacher*, and this creativity focuses upon two separate yet interrelated aspects of teaching and the individual. Obviously, as seen above, the teacher in the new humanities must be able to function creatively in the classroom. This ability extends from the need to "wing it" on days when the lesson plan just doesn't fit the needs of the students on up to the need to bring to life every humanistic model, from Stravinsky and Picasso and Martha Graham back to Job and Gilgamesh and Arjuna so that the classroom constantly exudes *spontaneity, excitement*, and *discovery*. Antithetically we can look at the classroom where the lesson plan is honored with subservient humility on days when even the teacher knows it's wrong, where Shakespeare "stinks" (to use the colorful description of many a student) because the teacher has exhumed him without an aerosol, where art is talked about instead of looked at and where music is 1685-1750 rather than a stereo recording, and we can label almost all the ills which plague contemporary education with the stigmatic "uncreative." It is this creative element in the teacher which sparks most of the really fine moments in the classroom, and without it the classroom is doomed to an eternity of textbooks, meticulously prepared and inviolable notes, and a sameness which borders on death.

The second aspect of creativity relates to the teacher himself. It is my contention that the teacher in the new humanities should enjoy some sort of creative activity for its own sake; *the teacher should be involved as an artist outside as well as inside the classroom*. When I refer to *artist* I mean that person involved with the production of objects of art, whether they be poems, paintings, songs, sculpture, dance, drama, film, or what have you. The point should be made by that list, even though it is incomplete. Why do I champion creativity to such an extent? Because my greatest admiration for the truly great
artist derives from my attempts to paint; my appreciation of the really profound poetry derives from the fact that I have written some fairly successful poetry; my love for Schubert grows out of my own songwriting efforts. So I feel that the teacher who creates can bring additional meaning to the creative process, being closer to it than the non- (or un-) creative teacher. I am also deeply committed to creativity as an integral part of the new humanities program itself, and I feel that all students in the new humanities should be involved in structured creativity exercises, but that belongs in another place and at another time. Let me conclude my four C's by saying that the teacher who is competent, committed, concerned, and creatively involved will have a greater love and respect for those models which are the core of the new humanities: competent, committed, concerned, and creative giants who have so significantly shaped our destiny by their C's.

Rather than explore in detail my three E's, let me list theme here and then examine the most pertinent of the three Enthusiasm, Experimentation, and Exemplary Action complete the escutcheon of the new humanities. Enthusiasm and experimentation have already been alluded to above, and to belabor them here would very definitely be carrying coals to Newcastle. The third E, however, deserves some sort of definition.

Exemplary Action

In another place I have written regarding the teacher in the new humanities:

He is not afraid to bare himself to his students, because he knows that their hungers are for honesty and openness (and this pertains to the actual admission by the faculty member that he drinks occasionally, has taken "pep" pills, may have smoked grass, and might have, somewhere deep in his superadolescent past, have found more than just a passing interest in some attractive member of the same sex; this then extends itself into an acknowledgement that the instructor is not the world's greatest authority on Byzantine mosaics, especially if he happens to teach American History.)

and I feel that these lines need some clarification. They need clarification because without clarification they appear to be encouragement toward license, and that is not what is intended at all. I would, instead, say this: no matter how valid (or significant, or successful, or what have you) the teacher feels his life style might be, he has no right to promote it for his students as an exemplary life style. I would say that the obverse is probably more true: I constantly advise my students not to try to be like me, because I am fully aware of the
nature of my own existence; and I don’t feel that most people have the ability or the endurance or the courage to live as I live! And lest this sound like I am coming on to you as some sort of absolutely free spirit I would say, “Nay!” immediately. To understand the nature of my life style simply go back to the beginning here and read the C’s and E’s once more: that is at the center of my life style. So while I am extremely open with my students (to the consternation of my wife, I’m sure) I am constantly alerting them to the nature of this life style. Certainly it is exemplary, but it is also precarious, awesome, situation-al, based upon loving concern, and oriented to this moment. And my awareness of these qualities in my own existence makes me very much aware of the fact that my students haven’t even begun to get that deep within themselves. I feel that a great deal of the radical style of today’s students and young adults derives from this inability to see deeply into oneself and therefore into anything to which one relates: if self-identity isn’t successfully complete then identity with the affinity for institutions, movements, causes, etc., is going to be vague and muddled. This is the domain of the radical and the reactionary; the person who has more or less “got it together” will be much more effective as an instrument of change than the individual who remains frightened, insecure, and unidentified, even to himself. And this is the way I see myself: an instrument of positive and hopefully profound personal, educational, and social change. Thus I have to live as I live. My students by and large will never set for themselves the goals that I have set for myself; therefore they cannot possibly subscribe to my life style. They do dig it, though, and they appreciate aspects of me to which they can aspire: authenticity, openness, concern, love, and so on into nirvana. This is at the core of exemplary action.

Certainly the section above will appear to many readers to be extremely presumptuous; where this is true I offer my apologies, if that is expected. But such openness, even if it appears extremely egotistic, is necessary if an environment of mutual trust is to be developed. How can I expect my students to be open with me if I refuse to be open with them? This requires me to say what I have said. I am very frightened by teachers who think that they have all the answers, who try to convert students to their own course of action or life style, dogmatically and without reason, who attack and ridicule those whose beliefs and commitments differ from their own, because there appears to be something of the weak and insecure in such a style. Even though the propensity for godliness is great in the new humanities, the teacher dare not play God with his charges’ lives! This is the cardinal sin in education. Where it happens education becomes indoctrination, intellectual and emotional growth becomes conditioning, and the shibboleth of the student body emerges as “ours is not to reason ‘why’?; ours is but to do and die.” And this sort of brainwashing I cannot abide, even though it permeates many a contemporary classroom.
Rather let me live so that I reflect those truly humane qualities including reasonable fear and uncertainty concerning my own style at times, that will equip my students to better negotiate the pitfalls and perils and existence in this world that we have so inhumanely structured. If my actions are exemplary then perhaps theirs will, in their own special way, be of somewhat greater importance.

Enter the "New Breed"

Since the title of this essay alludes to a new kind of creature in the classroom, perhaps we should reflect upon this requirement in conclusion. The analogy of the teacher of the new humanities with the well-known "renaissance man" has been alluded to above. But his true renaissance spirit emerges when he begins to champion the liberal arts concept in humanities education. The purpose of the liberal arts is to liberate the human spirit, to give it a new sense of significance and dignity, and to produce a questing mind and a virtue-seeking soul. Certainly it can be seen here that the new humanities champion the same causes, and with a generalist attitude toward the interrelatedness of the discipline that finds its source in the renaissance proper. Just as the Renaissance man of antiquity sought balance, symmetry, variety in unity, a rediscovery of the Greek ideal, so the contemporary renaissance man, the teacher in the new humanities, seeks to create a sense of harmony in the individuals with whom he comes in contact, equipping them to be more aware, more understanding, more tolerant, more involved with the entire spectrum of human experience. Granted this is an extremely unpopular (and perhaps at the moment untenable) position to occupy on today's highly compartmentalized and departmentalized faculties, both in the public schools and at the colleges and universities; still it is the most humane. Crying out against the desensitization, depersonalization, and dehumanization always inflicted upon the students in the name of "progress," the teacher of the new humanities dons the helmet, chain mail, and armor of enthusiasm, experimentation, and exemplary action, girds his steed with the panoply of competence, commitment, concern, and creativity, takes up the shield of virtue and the lance of wisdom and prepares to do battle for his ideas. While he may look a bit ludicrous clanking thus accoutered up and down the lists of Academe no doubt many will remember him for his outlandish efforts and for the lovely sounds he made. And as I tell my students, half in jest: "After the juggernaut has rolled across these villages and the peasants have been ground into pulp, someone will point to my own unique jelly and say, 'I remember him. He was the one with bells on his shoes.'"