

13 Teaching as Project: Choice, Perspective, and the Public Space

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There is a persistent theme in the culture's discourse today having to do with the widening gap between the private and the public. Ordinarily this means that individuals are withdrawing into their own spaces—refuges, says Richard Sennett (1977)—and whatever is left of a public space erodes. Recently, I have found the theme articulated in a remarkable novel by Milan Kundera (1984), a Czech emigré; in a *New York Times Book Review* essay by Benjamin De Mott (1984); and in a book entitled *Knowledge and Politics* by Roberto Mangabeira Unger (1975). None of them deals specifically with teaching or with schools, but I find their diverse expressions of the same concern so suggestive as to shed several kinds of light on what I have in mind to say.

Kundera's novel is called *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*; it has to do with a group of people, mainly Czech, caught between what Kundera calls "kitsch" and a kind of rootless, weightless freedom—the freedom of flight or emigration or irresponsibility. In its "original metaphysical meaning," he writes, "kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence." Communist kitsch is best represented by May Day, people with red flags marching in step to small brass bands, and even blasé faces beaming, "as if trying to prove they were properly joyful, or to be more precise, in proper agreement." Another kind of kitsch is represented by an American senator watching his children run on the grass around a skating rink and saying (without having any idea of whether his children are happy or not): "Now, that's what I call happiness." Kundera goes on to say that that is the kind of sentiment multitudes can share. "Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch." What,

in Kundera's universe, is the alternative to this complacency, this untroubled identification with the human race? It is his character Sabrina, leaving Paris, moving on, and on again, "because if she were to die here they would cover her up with a stone," and "in the mind of a woman for whom no place is home the thought of an end to all flight is unbearable." It is his character Tomas, prevented from being a surgeon and feeling himself on perpetual holiday, pursuing women, feeling a "black intoxication," betraying, lacking the will to abandon the glamorous path of betrayal, "staring impotently across a courtyard, at a loss for what to do."

I grant that the either/or is extreme; but a refugee from an occupied country like Czechoslovakia is bound to magnify the weight of collective sameness and denial and to find it difficult to see freedom as anything but a weightlessness, a negation. There are other "either/or" negations, though. Saul Bellow has spoken often about the tendency to come together under the rubric of "received knowledge" in this country, to refuse (not to reject) the unacceptable. Others have interpreted this as a turning away from the public space, where things would be brought into the open, where diverse voices would be audible, trying—in their very diversity—to create something they could hold in common and defend. Unger has written that it is a mistake to disregard the "link between the development of the individual self and the situation of society"; if you cut the tie between consciousness and politics, you present the ideal of the self as something that can only be realized in the private life, "and whose attainment is independent of society." As he sees it, the ideal of the self can never be actualized through private experiences, no matter how extraordinary those experiences may be. At once, he recognizes that human nature is never exhausted by or totally determined by the forms of social organization through which it shows itself.

De Mott's essay is called "Did the 1960s Damage Fiction?" but his discussion goes far beyond an accounting of the multiple isolated and impassive characters that have appeared in recent novels. His crucial point, however, is that the theme of the under-forty-five generation "is the death of fellow-feeling" (p. 1). He attributes it largely to the disillusionments of the 1960s, "the shock, guilt, hatred, repugnance for country and at length plain emotional exhaustion that ruled the thoughtful young in the late 60's and early 70's" (p. 1). What he finds in the fiction he studied is a kind of heartlessness, which he interprets as "an attempt at fidelity to the morality of remembering—an acknowledgment that, after a period in which lives beyond numbering were dealt with as waste matter, a quick return to human nuance would itself be a murder of conscience" (p. 26). Then he mentions some stirring among writers themselves and the need some feel to present new images of human possibility. And finally (in a passage I find

most relevant for those of us who teach) he writes: "But the understanding, among the Impassives, that writers (like the rest of us) have to feel forward—live forward a little, risk more in the name of full human connection—to become what they can become and to renew life for others, remains undernourished" (p. 27).

And that brings me to my own topic, which I want to set forth against just such a background of uncertainty and ambiguity. I think you see that teachers too are deeply uncertain when it comes to risking "in the name of full human connection," because they are uncertain as to what it signifies to realize an ideal of the self. They also are afflicted by the pressure of a distinctive kitsch, a kitsch associated with the occupational culture of too many schools. There is a glossing over of fundamental uncertainties and inequities; there is a dependence on received knowledge; there is a felt need, if not to be "properly joyful," at least to be or to seem to be "in proper agreement." For many teachers, the problem is one of the divided consciousness: they opt for efficiency and effectiveness because that is what is asked of them; but what they opt for is frequently at odds with what they value and what they believe. The response, for many, is not unlike that of Kundera's characters and of the fictional characters De Mott describes. They withdraw into privateness once they are out of school, in enclaves or family settings or on running tracks. And many are indeed impassive; they find it difficult to feel, and their attempts at fellow-feeling are likely to be limited. I am not sure of how much is due to disillusionment, how much to feelings of powerlessness, how much to a lack of face-to-face talk and dialogue, not merely with those like themselves but with those who are different, who have their own distinctive (and different) stories to tell. I do know that, like thousands of others in our society, they feel overwhelmed and often silenced by the bombardments of technical or cost-benefit language used to explain so much of what occurs. It comes not only from the mouths of the "great" and surrogate communicators; it derives as well, I regret to say, from much of what is presented as research, especially quantitative research. Too frequently imposed upon the lives of teachers, couched in language difficult to translate, it takes on a characteristic weight of its own; and ordinary language—what Jurgen Habermas (1972) called "inter-subjectively shared ordinary language" (p. 93)—begins to sound more and more irrelevant.

All this is exacerbated today by the numerous official and private reports charging the schools with "mediocrity" and calling for an ill-defined "excellence" for the sake of national defense and increased economic productivity. It is as if a new form of kitsch has permeated the school systems and publics alike, as people all over the country agree that the nation is indeed at "risk" (e.g., The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), that standards must be raised in every school, common

learnings legislated into curricula, technical and computer literacy increased, and teachers compelled to do their jobs. I am not inclined to review the arguments over merit pay and the rest, nor even to talk about master teachers or the various models of so-called "good schools" receiving grant support across the country. I am somewhat heartened, however, to read that more and more teachers around the country today are protesting that their points of view are being overlooked; and I note the letters being sent to newspapers suggesting that those actually in the schools, those who know how they look and feel and smell, need to have their voices heard. The neglect of those voices and the tendency to scapegoat teachers trouble me as much as the reductions in federal funding, the casual reliance on questionable test scores, and the narrow focus on the proposed "reforms."

Of course, it is a good thing that education is being talked about again, and that people are turning their attention to the public schools. And it just may be that, if enough teachers are willing to come together and find their voices, there will be a new interest in thinking about what it signifies to choose to be a teacher in our rapidly changing, threatened world. I realize that there have been watersheds before and that the demands made of teachers have been repeatedly redefined since the days Horace Mann explained what was meant by "aptness to teach" (Cremin, 1957). (Some readers may recall Mann's emphasis on knowledge of the rudiments, on understanding of methods and processes, and on preservation of order in the schoolroom. They may even remember his unabashedly sexist advice with regard to the manners of the teacher: "If he is the glass, at which they 'do dress themselves,' how strong is the necessity that he should understand those nameless and innumerable practices in regard to deportment, dress, conversation, and all personal habits, that constitute the difference between a gentleman and a clown." The so-called "gentleman," of course, represented all that was acceptable in a respectable, white, middle-class society. The "clown" referred to everything else.) There have been times when the single standard has been questioned, when benevolence has been stressed, and even a degree of permissiveness. More often, didactic and technical skills have been asked for (see, e.g., The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk*); and, in exceptional cases, there have been calls for rigor or intellectual stimulation or what Dewey called "conjoint communication" and the sharing of reflected-on experience. There has, more frequently than not, been a more or less hidden requirement that teachers function as "good daughters" (to use a nineteenth century superintendent's phrase from Tyack, 1974), middle managers, transmission belts, or compliant members of a "team."

It does seem to me that, throughout the history of the schools, certain assumptions have remained unshaken. It has generally been taken for granted, for instance, that the prime function of education is to prepare

people for a continually expanding (and, yes, an increasingly stratified) industrial and commercial system and that, at least for some, upward mobility would be ensured. I think, too, that it has generally been taken for granted that young people are responsible for their own successes and failures (despite lip service briefly paid to the importance of compensating for undeserved disadvantages) and that an unequal distribution of knowledge is natural and unavoidable. For all the occasional moments of crisis (wars, say, and economic depressions), Americans have been confident that existing political arrangements would be permanently maintained (even if they required, now and then, reliance on inquisitions or helmeted police). And just as important, even after Hiroshima and Nagasaki and until the very recent past, there has been what might be called an "animal faith" in the survival of the earth.

When we link all this to the persisting confidence in human rationality and technical expertise, to the belief in progress and the "special mission" of the United States in the world, we can see that the fundamentals of the teaching role were not likely to be challenged over the years. I mean by that, the view that the teacher's primary function was to represent what were defined as mainstream values and beliefs and to prepare the young for (or initiate them into) a developing, more or less predictable social world. I want to suggest, however, that we may have reached a moment in our history when much of this taken-for-grantedness is being exposed. That may be one reason why so many stentorian voices are insisting that basic values must be defended and basic skills and pieties taught. It may be why "radicals" and "vested interests" are being blamed, not only for calling attention to a shift in our foundations, but for weakening the family, discriminating against the majority, and endangering national defense.

In any case, this seems to me to be a time when teachers need to think what they are doing, as they seldom have before. In saying that, I recall Hannah Arendt, writing in her Prologue to *The Human Condition*: "What I propose . . . is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears. This, obviously, is a matter of thought; and thoughtlessness—the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of 'truths' which have become trivial and empty—seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time. What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing" (p. 6). Arendt, obviously, was not directing her charge specifically to teachers; but, because teachers have seldom been asked or permitted to think for themselves about what they were doing, and because teachers (more than most) are afflicted by a widespread "thoughtlessness," I—as a teacher—choose to take this personally.

To think in the way Arendt had in mind demands a personal presentness to our lived situations. It demands an overcoming of the split between

our private experiencing and the work we do, the work that ties us to the "situation of society" because of the kind of undertaking it is. Note that when Arendt proposes what she refers to as "a matter of thought," she does not say that we should think about who we *are* as selves or human beings. We should "think what we are *doing*," she tells us; the implication is that we identify ourselves by what we do. Dewey, like many existentialists following after him, says something very similar in *Democracy and Education*: "The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action" (p. 408). To speak of action is to have the taking of initiatives in mind; it is to think in terms of futuring, of reaching forward toward what is not yet.

If we were to conceive our teaching as a project, we would think of ourselves continually as feeling forward (to use Benjamin De Mot's language), living forward a little. The very notion of a project involves anticipating our future conduct through the use of imagination. It means moving into the future by means of a projection and trying to bring something into being that has not existed before in quite the same way. It is important to realize that, every time we talk in terms of action, our vantage point is that of an initiator, someone who is beginning something, the consequences of which cannot be predetermined. When Dewey (1916) describes deliberation, he calls it "a dramatic rehearsal in imagination of various competing possible lines of action" (pp. 188–192). It is a kind of thinking or reflectiveness that is very different from the predictive or the calculative; it leaves possibilities open; it opens the way for choice, for the unexpected, for surprise. The issue may be as simple as turning aside from the discussion of a story in an English class to give students an exercise in paragraph construction. It may be as complex as deciding to turn, in the same English class, to a discussion of visual art in order to make clear the range and distinctiveness of the languages of art. Often, we take initiatives that are unexpected even for us; and rehearse in imagination as we may, what Dewey called "the resultant action" will seldom be precisely what we had in mind.

We can compare that perspective on what we do when we teach with the perspective of those who take the vantage point of the system—as district administrators do, or state superintendents, or members of official commissions. They view what we do as observable and sometimes measurable behaviors resulting (or failing to result) in desired end-products or specific performances. They think in terms of trends, tendencies, cause-effect relationships; they do not ponder alternatives or "possible lines of action" as we do when we deliberate and when we choose to choose. For them, although there may be some acknowledgment of the random and the uncontrollable, freedom is irrelevant; it is at odds with statistical certainty, prediction, and regularity. Indeed, it is inefficient to take it into account.

In fact, it is only from the perspective of the agent, the one making a choice, that the unexpected occurs. It is only from that perspective that freedom of action can be conceived. If we look back on our own lives from the present moment, does it not seem as if everything somehow had to occur as it did? Attempting to explain it now, we would almost surely present what happened in terms of cause-effect relationships; it would be very difficult to talk in terms of things being otherwise than they were. Now let us shift our focus to where we are right now and ask ourselves what we are going to do next week, next fall. No matter how programmed we feel, no matter how many papers we have signed, no matter how many commitments we have made, we must acknowledge on some level that we are the initiators of what is to come, that in some degree we are the authors of our own lives. If asked to talk about next week, next fall, we would not do so in terms of cause-effect relationships—or I hope not. We would talk in terms of intentions, of anticipations, yes, of choices. We would recognize that, for all the constraints and limitations we see, things could conceivably be otherwise. It is the capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise that enables us (against a background of determinates and necessities) to reach out for our freedom.

But my concern, as I have said, is for those of us who have been touched by the "big chill" and who can no longer retain that perspective with regard to our work in the schools. Some of us forget that, like Joseph Conrad's Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, we may not like work, but we do like "what is in the work—the chance to find yourself. Your own reality—for yourself, not for others" (p. 41). And some forget that, as Alfred Schutz (1967) puts it, "the world of working is the reality within which communication and the interplay of mutual motivation becomes effective" (p. 227). For Schutz, it is through our work that we come to share the world with others, grow older together with others, have ends and means in common with others. But this is unlikely to happen if we function as technicians, classroom managers, or efficient clerks. There are too many teachers who do so because the processes that go on in their institutions strike them as so automatic and so necessary that there seems to be no alternative but to comply. Their schools seem to resemble natural processes; what happens in them appears to have the sanction of natural law and can no more be questioned or resisted than the law of gravity. So whatever initiatives they take are reserved for their private lives, as with Kundera's Sabina or Tomas the doctor, staring across the courtyard at a wall.

I know full well that some readers will say that everyone has a right to retreat, to live his or her own life as desired. And some readers will talk understandably about self-protection and survival, pointing out that anyone who lasts even a month in some of the urban schools is entitled to leave

behind at the end of the day the routine, the strain, the frustration, the noise, and the total shabbiness. How can one not sympathize with the person who tries to escape the weight, who opts (whenever the opportunity arises) for the "lightness of being"? But there are at least two things to say. One is that to adapt to the system by distancing the self is to accommodate to kitsch. "In the realm of totalitarian kitsch," Kundera writes, "all answers are given in advance and preclude any questions. A question is like a knife that slices through the stage backdrop and gives us a look at what lies hidden behind it." I am not saying that institutional kitsch is as barbarous as totalitarian kitsch, but I am suggesting that one who gives up questioning, who respects the "folding screens," who remains "blasé" is in danger of a type of corruption, of being sucked (in his or her very absence) into the collectivity. To cut the tie that links the person as a self-in-the-making, a consciousness reaching toward what is not yet, to the actualities of the social world is to automatize the self, to become like a member of the smiling crowd on the Prague street.

The tie that links the teacher to what exists behind the screens can be the tie of interrogation, of resistance. Jean-Paul Sartre (1963) wrote at one time that one can achieve freedom only in a resistant world. For him, the human being is characterized by a need to go beyond a situation—and by what that person succeeds in making of what he or she has been made (p. 91). He knew as well as anyone that we are indeed determined, conditioned in a multiplicity of ways, and that what determines and conditions must in some way be transcended if we are to achieve ourselves and be able to act on our freedom. The determinate, the given, the objectness of the world are what stand in our way and require resistance, if we ourselves are not to be made into acquiescent beings, mere things. One way of resisting is by means of a project, identifying something we want to bring into being; the practice we undertake in order to realize it involves "a flight and a leap ahead, a refusal and a realization." This means a recognition that there is some lack or deficiency that must be identified and refused, a lack that becomes visible only when we imagine what is possible. But it must be a lack that is subjectively experienced as a personal deprivation or loss and that can then be transformed into an objective problem.

This adds, for the teacher, a kind of dialectical demand to what has already been said about futuring and deliberating and acting to achieve what is not yet. In these times, given the mystifications of the system, given what may be a form of kitsch, teachers are likely to create their teaching as a project only if they can first reject the apparent inexorability of the system. This does not mean escaping it and seeking liberation in private life. It means coming to a critical understanding that schools, like other institutions, are fabricated by human beings and that they embody particular

attitudes and interpretations that serve particular cognitive and political interests. To exist in a dialectical relation to all this is to keep the questions open, preferably in association with others. It is to disclose, whenever possible, those explanations and descriptions that contradict what people experience in their concretely lived worlds. To hear a false promise, say, about the good life in a "high tech" society or about peace through nuclear build-up or about God being restored to His allotted place in school should be experienced by the teacher as a blow, a personal assault. To watch programs developed or plans made on the bland assumption that most families are two-parent families in full agreement with the ethos of the school should afflict the teacher with a sense of deficiency. To be told to take part in a tightening of requirements and a raising of standards across the board, no matter what the cost in failure and drop-out, should convey a feeling of personal frustration, if not despair. It is when people become aware in this subjective fashion of lacks, especially those that are covered up with affable, correct, or reassuring talk, that they are moved to repair, to surpass, to choose "a flight and a leap ahead, a refusal and a realization." And I hope it is clear that being moved in this way is a reaching out toward freedom, toward possibility, toward looking at things as if they could be otherwise.

I should think that a teacher in touch with his or her own interrogations, confrontations with deficiencies, and lived reality would project situations in which students would be empowered to make sense of their own lived situations—to "name," as it were, their worlds. To be enabled to name one's world is to be offered a range of languages or symbol systems or even disciplines to use as perspectives through which to see. It is not to be ushered into an abstract conceptual universe at odds with and distanced from what one knows as one lives. Nor is it to be slotted into or prepared for a self-existent system that may well be closed to one in the end, or antagonistic to one's values, or alienating to one's being. I realize that, in trying to choose this way along with others, teachers cannot but be confronted with terrible questions about the worth and justification of what they are doing: questions having to do with whether or not (for all that they think they see) they remain an accomplice in an unjust system, whether or not such an attempt to empower students is warranted when the ends in view are at odds with official prescriptions, and whether or not anyone can defend a course of teaching intended to provoke unease.

If we have educating and not schooling in mind, teaching and not training as our project, our responses to such questions and our choices will have much to do with the ways in which we define ourselves. Indeed, we will be actualizing ourselves by means of the actions we undertake and our imagining of what ought to be. I recall Saul Bellow in an interview a while

ago expressing weariness with the "cognitive stuff" and pleading for more attention (given the condition of the world) to the "imaginative stuff." He was not—he could not be—anti-intellectual when he said that. He, too, was thinking of alternatives, of refusing (I think) the givenness of things. If a teacher feels that way, I can see that teacher working to release students to interpret what they experience as variously and well as they can, to name what they live, and to go beyond.

The naming some of us have in mind not only taps the languages we have, and can make available, and the conceptual forms we need; it enlists the help of imagining so that students can venture into the possible and (having done so) discover what needs to be transformed. Think of James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus transmuted his lived world into multi-colored words, exorcising through his naming the "disorder, the misrule and confusion," the squalor, the superstition, the constraints, and finally those he calls the "guardians" of his past. Think of Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, moving from her halting, helpless letters to God ("I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.") to a gradual articulation and then a transformation of her life. ("Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God. Thank you for bringing my sister and our children home.") Unlike Stephen Dedalus and others who separate themselves from ordinary people the more they name and know, Miss Celie, having been helped by, supported by, and taught by strong women friends and models like Sofia and Shug Avery, becomes increasingly and more richly connected, more fully in the world. "Why us always have family reunion on July 4th, say Henrietta. . . . It so hot. White people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th, say Harpo, so most black folks don't have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other. Ah, Harpo, says Mary Agnes. . . . I didn't know you knowed history." Not only is this an example of how concepts can illuminate lived facts. It is an example of mind growing, ranging far, taking multiple perspectives (this last, after all, is Celie's accounting), incorporating diverse voices. And it is a glowing example of how the expanding capacity to name enabled a powerless woman to transcend objectness, to refuse to be a victim. At the start, she needed a sign to find out what was happening to her—when she had been made pregnant and did not know it. At the end, she can explain; she can put into words; and, like Virginia Woolf years before, to do that became a way of overcoming powerlessness. "There is no true word," writes Paulo Freire (1970), "that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world" (p. 75). To project, to imagine, to move persons to envisage the possible: This is what I believe to be the praxis of teaching in this uncertain, dangerous time.

It cannot happen, I am convinced, unless we are personally, consciously present to the world. Encounters with the arts can help us become present in this way; so can an enhanced being with others, growing older with others, listening to others, seeing through their eyes. We need the awareness of involvement if we are to be awakened from impassivity. We need to regain the attentiveness, the solicitude Dewey associated with mind. We need to respond to what has been called our "fundamental anxiety" (Schutz, p. 228)—an anxiety that comes with the knowledge that we are going to die and are afraid of dying and leaving no mark on the world. From this anxiety comes the desire to devise projects or plans of action, to lean toward the future. It is a desire that cannot be satisfied in subservience to kitsch or in flight from the common world.

Kundera, in his novel, offers one way out of the either/or when he writes: "Those of us who live in a society where various political tendencies exist side by side and competing influences cancel or limit one another can manage more or less to escape the kitsch inquisition: the individual can preserve his individuality; the artist can create unusual works." He is surely right about the values of a pluralist and multi-faceted society; but he does not say what can be done in such a society to expand the space where something common can be brought into being, something diverse individuals can cherish, can want to renew and keep alive.

It is the problem of connectedness; and it is the problem of what Arendt calls the "in-between." If persons, offered the opportunity to recapture their own voices, can come together in action once again, a public space will open. It will be a space, it ought to be a space, where persons with diverse perspectives can tell their stories and give expression to their lived lives. If they have been released to learn, to speak the languages through which the members of their society communicate and work for mutual understanding, their dialogue may in time give rise to a reciprocity of perspectives, out of which in turn may arise a vision of what they hold in common, what they cherish in common, what they imagine ought to be. This can happen in the corridors of schools and in classrooms. I hope it happens among teachers, as more and more take the risk of thinking what they are doing. To go back to De Mott: It may be a way of risking more "in the name of full human connection—to become what they can become and to renew life for others." Perhaps it will become a way, not of celebrating independence, but of celebrating one another. At least it will be an effort to serve the cause of life and to choose enduring life as possibility.

It remains open, this work that we do. But we can risk and imagine and think of what might be. I choose to end with two small selections from poets, both of whom knew of possibility, both of whom refused kitsch.

One is Rainer Maria Rilke; the other William Carlos Williams. Both might well be speaking to teachers, or so I believe.

Here is Rilke:

There's nothing so small but I love it and choose
to paint it gold-groundly and great
and hold it most precious and know not whose
soul it may liberate.

And Williams:

But only the dance is sure!
make it your own.
Who can tell
what is to come of it?

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