"Rich Distress": Education and Changing the World

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Perhaps most of us can identify with the narrator of Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*, who, above all, wanted a peaceful existence, believing that the “easiest way of life is the best.” We admire childhood and innocence, seeing in them nostalgic images of individual contentment, collective memories of the “good old days.” One company encourages us to “seize the weekend,” re-creating the abandon of youth, promising to sell us enough excitement (or ski equipment) to ward off the fear that our lives are otherwise empty spectacles, filled with mind-numbing work or desperate weekends on sofas watching other people have fun. Self-help psychology books fly off the shelf, feeding our abiding faith in our right to pursue happiness.

As deeply held is our belief in freedom. And yet if we pursue this idea, we run into problems. What do we mean? Is freedom John Smith’s vision of individual opportunity, where a person can fish to “pull up two pence, six pence, and twelve pence, as fast as you can haul and veer a line”? Or John Winthrop’s theological consideration of two kinds of freedom, the “natural” liberty to do what we want or the “civil” freedom to do what we ought (according to Winthrop, one based in human corruption, the other grounded in covenant with God). Do we agree with Benjamin Franklin’s certainty that “one Man of tolerable Abilities may work great Changes” in the world as the essence of freedom? Or, with Emerson that freedom requires non-conformity?

These are issues of consequence. Is the “easiest way of life” the best? Is happiness the true goal of our lives? And what do we mean by happiness anyway? Do our fears of incapacity or meaninglessness dampen hope for the individual or collective human potential? Despite our affirmation of freedom, my fear is that what we mean by liberty is individual autonomy. We strive desperately to do “what we want” since few of us have Ben Franklin’s faith that we can change the world. We seem to conclude that the world runs along tracks devised by god-like forces beyond our control. The only freedoms we imagine then involve matters of personal choice. It is only public atrocities like 9/11—or the winds of war—that call up pious patriotic platitudes of collective freedom. And then, too often, we believe that our freedom must come at the expense of suffering for others—usually distant neighbors in our global village.

I believe we can do better. A long time ago, I asked a student at Reed College, even then known for its radical individualism (and rigorous curriculum), what made him choose Reed. His answer knocked me for a cognitive loop: “I came to Reed because I wanted to change the world.”

I have spent the rest of my life exploring the meaning of what he said, providing a good example of what anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson in *Peripheral Visions* called a “longitudinal epiphany,” a moment
of cognitive dissonance followed by years of exploring the implications of the new perception. Perhaps Kurt Vonnegut expresses a similar idea in *Mother Night* when he writes, "We are what we pretend to be; so we should be careful what we pretend." I have aspired to be a teacher, in the terms of William Stafford, one who practices "learning in company with others." Inescapably this makes me a seeker. I teach at a liberal arts university, the goal of which is to liberate us from our ignorance (another possible notion of freedom). Here are some of the philosophical underpinnings for my teaching:

Life involves suffering as its essence. We don't know enough. We fear isolation. We wonder if it all makes sense.

We seek respite from our suffering with humility, tempering our own convictions. At the same time, our humility makes us appropriately skeptical of the conventional attitudes of those who manipulate matters for their own agenda.

Does this mean that there is no truth? American poet William Carlos Williams says, "There are no ideas but in things." Truth comes to us from outside. Is he right? Or do we create truth from the fabric of our own lives, each person inevitably having a unique angle of vision? My answer is no to both. We arrive at Truth through DIALOGUE with our world and other people.

We can distinguish Truths and truths. In fact, this is one of the key purposes of education. How do we tell "better" ideas from "poorer" truths? Poor ideas distance us from reality and from other people. As we bind others with poor truths, we constrict ourselves as well. "Better" ideas set us free ("The Truth shall make you free."). They connect people. We recognize Truths because

- They are simple. They are paradoxical.
- They make things better. They fill us with awe.
- They are full of mystery. They convict us to act for the Good.

Truths show us that we're in this world together.

On the other hand, truths are agreements and conventions (relative and changeable—but powerful). We unpeel layers of reality to approach Truth. Truth is ineffable, unsayable. And yet, as the apostle Paul might say, "Truth is patient, truth is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Truth does not delight in evil but rejoices with love. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." Truth is also dynamic, pushy, confrontational, and frustrating; it demands so much of us, perhaps most especially the "easy life." In *Absalom, Absalom*, William Faulkner calls humans "that species all of whose actions are controlled by words... that meager and fragile thread... by which the little surface corners and edges of men's secret and solitary lives may be joined for an instant now and then before sinking back into the darkness where the spirit cried for the first time and was not heard and will cry for the last time and will not be heard either."

Bertrand Russell also recognizes that the stakes are high. He shows us that the pursuit of Truth—i.e., education—is political. "Men fear thought more than they fear anything else on earth—more than ruin, more even than death. Thought is subversive and revolutionary, destructive and terrible; thought is merciless to privilege.

Education, as I see it, invites us to think. It asks of us only the implausibly possible: to overcome our fears, to wake up, to be critical of the pompous, to act with humility, to expect beauty (In *Herzog*, Saul Bellow says, "Unexpected intrusions of beauty; that's what life is."). In the words of John Keats, it is the "realm of soul-making." The heart of education is our dialogue with the world, the possible outcome of which is the discovery of love.

The revolution education calls for is our participation in the continuing attempt to create the world. And just as Barfield's narrator has to give up his easy life in light of Barfield's existential "passive resistance," education beckons us to what William Stafford calls the "rich distress" of becoming human. From this base, we change the world, each in our own way, each in community with others. Allen Ginsberg provides the Big Picture: "The purpose of living is to relieve the suffering; all the rest is drunken dumbshow."

With such stakes, we should be demanding more rather than less of our instructors, pushing them to excellence as we challenge ourselves to fulfill our mission: we are meaning-making "machines," as Buckminster Fuller puts it. Or we could say that we seek to follow God's will, to love others as God loves us. Our job, as William Stafford describes it, is to "find what the world is trying to be."

We seek to create not the good, but the better society. When the issues are war and peace, life and death, meaning and nihilism, when we must raise healthy children, understand how to confront differences (justice, Kim Stafford notes in *Early Morning*, his reflection on the life of his father, is "yielding to delight in human variety"), we need Information, Imagination, Integrity, and Industry. Information frees us from "truths" that deflate rather than empower, liberates us from the tyranny of "truths" that oppress. Imagination engenders "reckless talk" (William Stafford again), helps us see that the unlikely is possible, that we are created not only with original sin but with original blessing as well. Integrity convicts us to seek the Truth: We need to know what we believe (and, with humility, say with Luther, "Here I stand"). Industry is the backbone of democracy, which demands true patriotism (it is my Dad's voice in the back of my head: "Hard work, son. There are no shortcuts.") As 1960s icon Abbie Hoffman explained, "Democracy is not something you believe in... it's something you do. You participate. If you stop doing it, democracy crumbles and falls apart."

Enjoy your education!