

IMPORTANCE OF A PHILOSOPHY FOR TEACHERS

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THERE is a common misconception abroad, it seems to me, concerning the nature of philosophy and how it is learned. When I see a school staff set itself the task of drawing up a school philosophy, my interest wavers. I envision the countless hours of committee work and staff meetings devoted to discussions of trivia, all ending in a statement so sanctimonious and so general that it threatens no one.

When I see this kind of project proposed, my impulse is to suggest quickly: "Don't begin with this kind of thing; instead, start experimenting right now to improve a practice that offends you."

The fact is that a philosophy emerges from experience. It would be more accurate to say that a philosophy results from reflection on experience. Once acquired, it constitutes a *sense of rightness*—an organic attitude that looks both toward the past that nurtured it, and to the future where tentative actions are to be considered.

There is an inevitability, too, in everyone's present philosophical position—that is, it could not possibly be different. One cannot deliberately take a position contrary to his present sense of

rightness. His attitudes will continue to change, of course, as the impacts of new experience affect them. Realizing this fact of inevitability should enjoin us all to tolerance for the present points of view of others.

Reflection on Experience

Because a philosophy comes from reflection on experience, it seems quite doubtful whether we can teach a new one indirectly—that is, theoretically—in detachment from the learner's reflection on his own questionable acts. We may be able to teach *about* philosophy; we might, for example, be able to teach the philosophy of Socrates, so that the learner would be able to tell something of what Socrates believed.

This would be quite different, however, from what Dewey spoke of as integration into one's own being—that is, having a built-in, emotion-freighted memory of one's own actions and their personal and social consequences. Dewey's comment on moral training¹ is quite apropos here; it is, he said, "pre-

¹ John Dewey. *My Pedagogic Creed*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1896. p. 14.

cisely that which one gets through having to enter into proper relations with others in a unity of work and thought." It is only during a poignant weighing of one's own or another's genuine emotional perplexity that such an integration can take place.

I draw these thoughts, now, for example, from a reflection on my own past involvements. When I began to teach, I lacked both practical experience and a dependable philosophy of education. I had already tried to read John Dewey and William James for a college course, but I only understood them dimly because my experience was not abreast of their ideas.

For my own practical guidance, I had only some illusory notions drawn from a primitive folklore based on force. The teacher must be a strong dominant figure, I thought, and he must have the strength, physical and otherwise, to maintain his control. And so I acted like a martinet, commanding obedience and anticipating trouble even where it did not exist. The pupils reacted to this treatment in a predictable human manner. While they obeyed outwardly, they began to practice an underground resistance exactly like that of my own callow youth. This eventually led to physical clashes with suspected leaders, which I won through superior strength and position.

The community, which of course had fostered my illusions, thought that I was a good disciplinarian. Yet looking back from my present experience and its ancillary philosophy, I would give a good deal if I could live those years over. I know, now, that had I been a kindly, encouraging, helpful person, those fine pupils would have loved me. In every case

of physical violence, I now see that I was tragically wrong.

Work with Remedial Pupils

Perhaps the most telling experience in my professional life was my work with so-called remedial pupils. I began this work without any special preparation, and I doubt whether special training given before the real encounter would have helped me very much—unless, of course, it had been genuine laboratory work under the direction of a person of better experience than mine. As it was, I followed the stereotyped practices of the day: testing; assigning remedial exercises, many of which I devised myself; re-testing; and using motivational tricks of one kind or another.

My own enlightenment came when I began to observe the habits of the pupils themselves. Trapped in a system that was deliberately competitive, these young people were the chronic failures. Their pitiful defenses against their predicament were quite obvious. All of them sought to hide their inability under various false pretenses. Tests of any kind were, in their eyes, only methods of a cruel exposure. If, for example, I would ask them to report the number of pages they had read during a class hour, they would turn in fantastic figures.

One boy of large, awkward stature had developed a skill in making wisecracks. His classmates always rewarded him with appreciative laughter. I stepped up beside him one day to help him with his reading before the class. Despite his silly antics, I discovered that he was trembling violently, and sweat stood out in drops on his forehead.

I remember another boy of small

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stature—often a very significant factor—whose mother was a patient in a mental hospital. This boy would invariably come to my room late, with a huge pile of textbooks in his arms. Every day he would poise this load with maddening deliberation and let it come crashing down upon the desk. One day it occurred to me that probably what he needed was to be in the limelight. "Billy," I said, "would you like to help me take the roll every day?" He came up beside me and stood there facing the class. I helped him spell the names of the absent pupils. When he had finished, he put the slip in the slot of the door. The scheme worked like magic. He was always on time after that, and his annoying manner ceased.

I began to ask myself what we had been doing to these young people throughout the apparently dismal years

of their schooling. I was thrown back inevitably upon a sobering self-scrutiny. And obviously I saw the single remedy that might restore their well-being: humane acceptance and kindly encouragement. The school, I saw at once, must withdraw its standard expectations; it must seek to discover and to honor their simple ambitions to learn and to grow up.²

A Congenial Drift

The resulting parallels of philosophy were simply automatic. I found not only clear directions for my own professional improvement, but I could discover everywhere the supporting thoughts of others. As my own experience has changed, I have felt a congenial drift toward the pragmatic philosophers. It was they, I found, who had a warm current of compassion in their veins. The earlier ones, it seemed to me, came to stand as posthumous critics of my own shortcomings. Listen, for example, to William James:

Now the blindness in human beings, of which this discourse will treat, is the blindness with which we all are afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves.

We are practical beings, each of us with limited functions and duties to perform. Each is bound to feel intensely the importance of his own duties and the significance of the situations that call these forth. But this feeling is in each of us a vital secret, for sympathy with which we vainly look to others. The others are too much absorbed in their own vital secrets to

² See Earl C. Kelley. *In Defense of Youth*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962. Chapter 10: see also Jesse Stuart. *The Thread That Runs So True*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954. p. 270-80.

take an interest in ours; hence the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with the significance of alien lives. Hence the falsity of our judgments, so far as they presume to decide in an absolute way on the value of other persons' conditions or ideals.

That is James speaking out sixty-seven years ago in his *Talks to Teachers*. How clear today, how pertinent, how humane! Could one who had learned this lesson through experience ever serve again the authoritarian role? James understood the iniquity of rigid, mass-administered curricula. To me he seems to say that we need more humanity, more freedom for the personal ambitions of others, more respect for the child who hears a different drummer. Accordingly, I have drawn up a new definition of the teacher's role: I see him now as a helper, as one who makes possible children's dreams.

And Dewey, too, now came to stir my mind as with a trumpet. Listen to his repudiation of the formal regimen:

Save as the efforts of the educator connect with some activity which the child is carrying on of his own initiative independent of the educator, education becomes reduced to a pressure from without. It may, indeed, give certain external results but cannot truly be called educative. Without insight into the psychological structure and activities of the individual, the educative process will, therefore, be haphazard and arbitrary. If it chanced to coincide with the child's activity it will get a leverage; if it does not, it will result in friction, or disintegration, or arrest of the child-nature.³

Here, I think, is illustrated the true value of philosophy. Speaking out of his own experiences with the children in the University of Chicago Elementary

³ *My Pedagogic Creed, op. cit.*

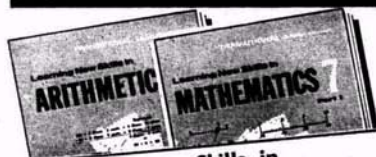
School seventy years ago, Dewey sounds the universal note of compassion. Hearing his dicta—drawn from his experience—I find an echo of my own. I liked Gardner Murphy's peroration in 1961:

John Dewey, it is to you to whom we are chiefly obligated for this vision of active and democratic education in the public schools, the instilling of socially significant habits derived from the common needs of ordinary people.⁴

And thus the world moves on—slowly but surely, toward a more abundant freedom. We swim in the same social stream as the prophets of old, but a little farther down. The office of philosophy is to bind their times and ours together in a commonality of reflection on experience.

⁴ Gardner Murphy, *Freeing Intelligence Through Teaching*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961. p. 31.

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