

by Murray Pomerance

Against Learning: Education as Art

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The great questions are those an intelligent child asks and, getting no answers, stops asking. — George Wald

Certainly one of the more stalwart supports of our system of education and its atmosphere of emotional antisepsis, intellectual compromise and ethical plasticity, is the widely accepted notion that human growth is best advanced by "learning". This is fundamentally an individual's adaptation to his environment rather than an expression of what he feels himself to be. I see personal growth and healthy living as being synonymous; they have a great deal to do with sincerity and spirit and are, consequently, usually antithetical to "learning" as we know it.

Learning is adaptive in this way: the individual must make a settlement — an acquiescence as it were, a bargain — with his field, so that what he senses or feels, and what the sensory data representing his environment suggest may be true, are brought into alignment. His adaptation may be the recognition that things outside him could augment or supplant his inner knowledge and should be incorporated and assimilated, or "learned". Or it may be the definition of the nature and potentialities of his field from its structure and the subsequent decision, made on that basis, as to his action. In any case, his adaptation is a capitulation of one kind or another.

In its most germinal aspect, then, our education consists in putting *into* the human being what we feel he must have but lacks; in our more "progressive" experiments, we allow the student to have some say about what he lacks.

Now this is all a rather subtle ellipsis of the more fundamental and not unpigmented assumption that young people

should fashion their lives as we have fashioned ours. We are, in the very cleanest of faith, training them to live in the world and to adopt our putatively successful modes for adapting to its exigencies. I do not mean to suggest we are gearing them to *fit into society*. Indeed, that would be dirty; we are even dirtier. We are assuming that because they are not skilled enough to live well in our world, we should impart to them the skills and the resolve necessary for such a life, whether or not they are anxious to live one. Our assumptions, of course, and our behavior, neglect and functionally mask our impending deaths and our terror of them. A cursory reading of Freud will substantiate all of this.

I am trying to suggest two things. First, that there is nothing we find meaningful we can teach anyone, so that our impulse to bequeath to our progeny is rooted in a desire to master and control them. Without our "guidance" they would fashion their own world, formally independent — no doubt — of other people's hangups and idiosyncracies. Conflict, to them, would be an atavism.

Secondly, I am suggesting that the notion of education as adaptive learning is not only arbitrary, it is insidious and ideological. Bluntly, I am saying that people who want to *guide* others choose the directions in which their students should march not randomly but out of vested interest. It is true, but unfortunately no longer a truism, that no one needs to be educated in order to live a fulfilling life. He must be *aware*, but our present education makes no one aware who isn't anyway; it is, in fact, predicated on a fair amount of assumed student ignorance. No one who really knew what was going on would pay for the privilege of staying in college for four years unless he wanted, ultimately, to destroy it.

What, then, is growth? It is a creative, not an adaptive, process. It is individualistic; it is totally non-guided. It is non-linear (Aristotle was, among other

things, wrong). It is internally consistent; that is, the individual who is growing knows why he does what he does, although he may be, in that respect, unique. Growth is, obviously, synthetic and not analytical; analysis is Thanatos, Death. Being private, growth is mysterious. Being mysterious, it is likely to be incommunicable.

A healthy person needs only one thing in order to be assured of the possibility of growing. He will, eventually, brush aside the barricades of space and time imposed by what we like to call "the school". He will make himself oblivious to the insensitive harping of pedagogical Medea's, and he will laugh at other people's unfounded and presumptively accurate gradings, or judgments, of him and his work.

But he needs discipline. He needs fidelity. If he is healthy, he will be devoted to his own growth, which is to say he will be not only committed but also attached to his own life. He must be faithful, however, to his subjectivity lest he tarnish it. Albert Camus said he wrote *L'Etranger* about a man who was disciplined. Discipline means telling the truth, as you see it, always; you can lie by saying what is not true, and you can lie by saying more than is true. A creative moment is a truthful one only if its expression contains the truth, no more and no less. Sloppy expression — even to oneself, nay, most principally to oneself — is lying.

I think young people should be able to create incessantly. It goes without saying the imposition of a medium, which once would have been insulting, is now comical. It is not funny. Creation and growth can be funny. One ought always be creating oneself anew. This is life. The trick is to do it *right*; there is only one way for each of us. The Marquis de Sade said so, as did Kafka and as do the Beatles; they are right.

I think youngsters should create anything they want and I think they should

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York U. rugby team sings

Against . . .



John Adams, student pres., addresses Convocation.

. . . Learning

serious photo by Lorne Colt

we present these poems. The following were written by grade 6 students at St. Augustine's School, Bell Island, Newfoundland. Contributions are by Miss Carol Mitchell, their teacher.

Rain
I like
To hear the rain
Go patter
On my window pane.
Sharon Parsley

Dawn
Dawn is here
The grass is wet
With morning dew and
The sun has yet
To shine on you.
Janice Parsons

Thanksgiving
What is there to be thankful for.
The sun, the moon and the stars,
The river and the stream
that flows.
The sun that sets on the
sea that flows.
The birds that nest
in the trees.
Thank-you God
for all of these.
Robert O'Brien

Wondering
I wonder why the grass is green
And why the leaves are too
I wonder why the flowers are pretty
And why they're covered with dew.
I wonder why the summer comes
And why the winter is cold.
I wonder why we have twelve months
And why we all grow old.
I'm always, always wondering,
My mind flies off on wings.
I wonder why I wonder
About all different things.
Louise Pinsent (11 yrs.)