APPENDIX I: TRANSFORMATIVE


The Transformative Tradition

The adjective “transformative” describes what this tradition deems successful teaching to be capable of accomplishing: a transformation of one kind or another in the person being taught—a qualitative change often of dramatic proportion, a metamorphosis, so to speak. Such changes would include all those traits of character and of personality most highly prized by the society at large (aside from those having to do solely with the possession of knowledge per se). They also would include the eradication or remediation of a corresponding set of undesirable traits. In either case, the transformations aimed for within this tradition are typically conceived of as being more deeply integrated and ingrained within the psychological makeup of the student—and therefore as perhaps more enduring—than are those sought within the mimetic or epistemic outlook, whose dominant metaphor is one of “adding on” to what already exists (new knowledge, new skills, etc.) rather than modifying the would-be learner in some more fundamental way.

What traits and qualities have teachers working within the transformative tradition sought to modify? Our answer depends on when and where we look. Several centuries ago, for example, when the mission of schools was primarily religious, what was being sought was nothing other than students’ salvation through preparing them for Bible reading and other religiously oriented activities. Such remains the goal of much religious instruction today, though the form of its expression may have changed somewhat.

Over the years, as schooling became more widespread and more secular in orientation, educators began to abandon the goal of piety per se, and focused instead upon effecting “transformation” of character, morals, and virtue. Many continue to speak that way today, though it is more common to name “attitudes,” “values,” and “interests” as the psychological traits many of today’s teachers seek to modify.

However one describes the changes sought within the transformative tradition, it is interesting that this undertaking is usually treated as more exalted or noble than the more mimetic type of teaching. Why this should be so is not readily apparent, but the different degrees of seriousness attached to the two traditions are apparent in the metaphors associated with each of them.

As I have already said, within the mimetic tradition knowledge is conceived of as something akin to material goods. Like a person materially wealthy, the possessor of knowledge may be considered “richer” than his ignorant neighbor. Yet, like the materially rich and poor, the two remain fundamentally equal as human beings. This metaphor of knowledge as coins in one’s purse is consonant with the concomitant belief that it is “detachable” from its owner, capable of being “shown,” “lost,” and so forth. A related metaphor, one often used to lampoon the mimetic tradition, depicts the learner as a kind
of vessel into which knowledge is "poured" or "stored." What is important about all such metaphors is that the vessel in question remains essentially unchanged, with or without its "contents."

The root image within the transformative tradition is entirely different. It is much closer to that of a potter working with clay than it is to someone using the potter's handiwork as a container for whatever contents such a vessel might hold. The potter, as we know, not only leaves her imprint on the vessel itself in the form of a signature of some kind, she actually molds and shapes the object as she creates it. All who later work with the finished product have a different relationship to it entirely. They may fill it or empty it to their hearts' content. They may even break it if they wish. But all such actions accept the object in question as a "given," something whose essence is fundamentally sacrosanct.

The metaphor of teacher-as-artist or teacher-as-creator gives the transformative tradition an air of profundity and drama, perhaps even spirituality, that is largely lacking within the mimetic tradition, whose root metaphor of mere addition of knowledge or skill is much more prosaic. But metaphors, as we know, are mere figures of speech. No matter how flattering they might be, they don't tell us whether such flattery is deserved. They leave us to ask whether teachers working within the transformative tradition actually succeed in doing what they and others sometimes boast they can do. And that's not all they leave unanswered. Beyond the question of whether transformative changes due to pedagogical interventions really occur at all there awaits the more practical question of how they happen. What do teachers do to bring them about? As we might guess, it is easier to answer the former question than the latter.

Fictional accounts of teachers who have had enduring effects on their students of the kind celebrated within the transformative tradition are familiar enough to be the stock in trade of the pedagogical novel. Goodbye, Mr. Chips and The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie are but two of such works that come to mind most readily. Each exemplifies a teacher who has a profoundly transformative influence on his or her students. But what of real life? Do teachers there make a difference of the same magnitude as do the fictional Chipses and Brodies?

An answer to that question which I find quite convincing is contained in a study undertaken by Anne Kuehnle, a student of mine a few years back. In preparation for her term paper in a course on the analysis of teaching, work which later became the basis of her master's thesis, Kuehnle distributed questionnaires to 150 friends and neighbors in her hometown of Elmhurst, Illinois; she asked them to write a paragraph or two about the teachers they remembered most vividly. The results were striking. Not only did most respondents comply enthusiastically with the request, their descriptions yielded literally scores of vignettes showing the transformative tradition in action. Here are but three of them, chosen almost at random.

He moved the learning process from himself to us and equipped us to study independently. We were able to see such mundane concepts as money supply, price mechanism, supply and demand, all around us. We became interested. We actually talked economics after class. In Eckstein's class I became aware that I was there to evaluate, not ingest, concepts. I began to discriminate...

She was, to me, a glimpse of the world beyond school and my little town of 800 people. She was beautiful, vivacious, witty, and had a truly brilliant mind. Her energy knew no limits—she took on all the high school English classes, class plays, yearbook, began interpretive reading and declamatory contests, started a library in the town, and on and on. She was our town's cultural center.

His dedication rubbed off on nearly all of us. I was once required to write him a 12-page report, and I handed in an 84-page research project. I always felt he deserved more than the minimum.

These three examples are quite representative of the protocols quoted throughout Kuehnle's report. So if we can trust what so many of her respondents told us—and I am inclined to do so, for had I been asked I would have responded much as they did—there seems no shortage of testimonial evidence to support the conclusion that at least some teachers do indeed modify character, instill values, shape attitudes, generate new interests, and succeed in "transforming," profoundly and enduringly, at least some of the students in their charge. The question now becomes: How do they do it? How are such beneficial outcomes accomplished?

As most teachers will readily testify, the answer to that question will disappoint all who seek overnight to become like the teachers described in Kuehnle's report. It seems there are no formulas for

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accomplishing these most impressive if not miraculous feats of pedagogical skill. There are neither simple instructions for the neophyte nor complicated ones for the seasoned teacher. There is not even an epigram or two to keep in mind as guides for how to proceed, nothing analogous to the ancient “advice” that tells us to feed a cold and starve a fever.

And yet that last point is not quite as accurate as were the two that came before it. For if we look carefully at what such teachers do and listen to what others say about their influence, we begin to see that they do have some characteristic ways of working after all, “modes of operation” that, even if they can’t be reduced to recipes and formulas, are worth noting all the same. The three of these modes most readily identifiable seem to me to be:

1. **Personal modeling.** Of the many attributes associated with transformative teaching, the most crucial ones seem to concern the teacher as a person. For it is essential to success within that tradition that teachers who are trying to bring about transformative changes personify the very qualities they seek to engender in their students. To the best of their ability they must be living exemplars of certain virtues or values or attitudes. The fulfillment of that requirement achieves its apex in great historical figures, like Socrates and Christ, who epitomize such a personal model; but most teachers already know that no attitude, interest, or value can be taught except by the teacher who himself or herself believes in, cares for, or cherishes whatever it is that he or she holds out for emulation.

2. “**Soft**” suspension. Among teachers working toward transformative ends, the “showing” and “telling” so central to the mimetic tradition (actions contained in Step Two: Present of the methodological paradigm outlined above) are replaced by less emphatic assertions and by an altogether milder form of pedagogical authority. The teaching style is rather more forensic and rhetorical than it is one of proof and demonstration. Often the authority of the teacher is so diminished by the introduction of a questioning mode within this tradition that there occurs a kind of role reversal, almost as though the student were teaching the teacher. This shift makes the transformative teacher look humbler than his or her mimetic counterpart, but it is by no means clear that such an appearance is a trustworthy indicator of the teacher’s true temperament.

3. **Use of narrative.** Within the transformative tradition “stories” of one kind or another, which would include parables, myths, and other forms of narrative, play a large role. Why this should be so is not immediately clear, but it becomes so as we consider what is common to the transformations that the schools seek to effect. The common element, it turns out, is their moral nature. Virtues, character traits, interests, attitudes, values—as educational goals all of them fall within the moral realm of the “right” or “proper” or “just.” Now when we ask about the function or purpose of narrative, one answer (some might say the only one) is: to moralize. Narratives present us with stories about how to live (or how not to live) our lives. Again, Socrates and Christ come readily to mind as exemplars of the teacher-as-storyteller as well as the teacher about whom stories are told.

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