

## Values as a Process of Encounter

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"The point here is that it takes strength to be equal, to allow the object to *make a claim on you on its own terms.*"—Ernest Becker in *Angel in Armor* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1969).

AT THE present moment in Western culture any teacher concerned with the development of personal values must be strong enough to be equal to the youth he meets. Specifically, he must be able to open himself to the claims made upon him by the young and, on the basis of these claims, to live through the value questions being faced by youth in contemporary society.

The fundamental failure of most current teaching as it relates to value formation is that teachers lack the strength to encounter students *on their own terms*. Students are forced to accept the values embodied in most educational programs implemented by teachers or risk the social handicap of school failure. The experience of the school culture is therefore colored by a kind of violence which demands that values be introjected whether or not an individual relates personally to these cultural commitments.

The fundamental distinction between values that are introjected and those to which a person relates organismically is a crucial consideration for anyone dealing with developing personalities.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Carl Rogers develops this distinction well in a statement about the valuing process in the mature person in: *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 68 (2): 160-67; 1964.

The exercise of authority that is part of any educational institution can result in mere introjection of a set of values that have debilitating effects on a personality in the long run. In order to provide young personalities with the opportunity to create a set of organismic values, that is, authentic personal commitments, a new type of authority must be established in educational settings. Such authority resides in a relationship between teacher and student that involves *both* in the process of establishing personal values.

### A Different Authority

This relationship of teacher and student involves a different exercise of authority whose only basis can be the wisdom a teacher can offer on an issue personally lived through in the present. To the extent he shares the existential issues of his students, to that extent he can teach, where teaching is understood to involve the development of persons.

When it comes to the purveying of information, which is essentially a mechanical enterprise, a person could "teach" without possessing the relationship described above. However, the central bias of these remarks is that teaching as a human enterprise involving value formation in young persons demands a new relationship to youth, the terms of which are defined by that youth.

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Relating in this manner requires that teachers be able to encounter genuinely the young persons they deal with in school settings. Only in an encounter relationship can one person experience the value concerns of another, because these concerns begin to become his own. Unless teachers and students share in this way the same field of care, there will be little possibility of value formation in school settings.

Developing persons who can fulfill this aspect of the teaching function is an absolute necessity for present educational settings. No amount of programmatic or technological innovation will fill the need for the kind of personal relationships young people need to be able to discover the values that are truly their own. Contemporary society makes such relationships especially important. Present society is best described as temporary<sup>2</sup> in nature; values in such a society possess an openness to the future that will not permit the kind of stable definitions that perhaps existed for past value systems. Values today are in process and personal development demands learning to live in constant process. No longer can a person look to stable social structures outside himself to provide him with value definitions and modes of behavior consistent with these definitions.

When societal structures become as temporary as they are in the developed countries of the world, personal stability must come from value commitments that are internalized by the person. Such commitments are always open to the future because they involve a constantly developing person.

### Teaching as Personal Action

The fact that values today are open in the dynamic sense just outlined does not mean that there are not some fundamental processes that are essential to becoming a person. These basically humanizing processes are the most crucial elements for present and

future educational settings. Failure to provide young people with involvement in these processes is to fail to educate in any meaningful sense for the present culture. However, the ability of a teacher to involve students in humanizing processes is contingent upon his ability to establish the kind of relationship already described. To be a humanizing influence a teacher must permit himself to be met as a person by another person; this demands he act in a personal fashion, not merely carry out a teaching function.

A striking illustration of the radical difference in how students experience a teaching role as opposed to truly personal behavior is provided in a recent account by a young black teacher of her first week with the students in an all-white elementary school. Like most teachers recently graduated from typical teacher education programs, this young woman had a whole series of formal behaviors planned that were perceived as apropos to the teaching function. Her lessons plans were drawn; class procedures were efficiently, precisely prepared.

She was even sophisticated enough to be highly conscious of her verbal interaction patterns and was committed to an "indirect" style of teaching behavior. Then she met her students, most of whom had never been acquainted with a black person before, and they simply refused to allow her to "teach" as she had planned. All her planned behaviors were consistently shoved aside by the fourth-grade children who persisted in confronting her with highly personal questions, unrelated to the content she was attempting to teach.

After a week of being frustrated in carrying out her plans, she finally succumbed to the student pressures and began to deal with the personal interests the children were expressing. They wanted to know her thoughts on a myriad of topics. They were fascinated by her appearance so different and yet so much the same as their own. At one point a large group of students gathered around her desk and simply wanted to touch her hair. After a few days of thus relating to the students *on their terms*, this young woman was able to begin dealing with all the topics she felt responsible to teach, but in the matrix of

<sup>2</sup> Warren Bennis and Philip Slater. *The Temporary Society*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968. Gives an excellent description of the characteristics of a temporary society and some of its implications.

the personal relationship she had now established with the children.

What is interesting about this incident is that had this teacher been white, the personal concerns of the children would have probably been *initially* less intense. Formal teaching behavior as planned by the black teacher but carried out by a white person may likely have been enough to suppress the personal interests of the children and may have fallen quietly on a passive audience. Yet without experiencing the person of a teacher, how is it possible for the young to begin considering any kinds of values which are highly personal commitments? In spite of this, as in the example of the young black teacher, the training programs and role expectations within schools tend to suppress personal behavior in favor of a teaching function focused on content and highly impersonal.

### Three Basic Processes

If a school is concerned with value formation in students, the first thing it must offer the young is the experience of persons—the person of a teacher and of each other as persons. This is the primary value worth holding in a society that consistently threatens the person. In a one-dimensional culture it is imperative that we enable young people to develop intensely personal and fortified experience so as to bring a human dimension to a society bent on the destruction of the personal world.<sup>3</sup>

Working out of this fundamental experience of persons, a school ought to offer the

<sup>3</sup> The devastation of personal experience is poignantly described by R. D. Laing in: *The Politics of Experience*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1967.

opportunity for its students to develop a center of fidelity. Such a center would be outside the self, enlarging the personal vision and providing youth with something for which or someone for whom to be responsible. The content of this center might be an idea, a person, a profession—whatever the freedom of an individual inclines him toward. Any school that wishes to provide an opportunity for value formation must give persons within its environment the chance to develop a center of fidelity. Once again, it is impossible to examine centers of personal fidelity without the trust and openness toward a person that frees an individual to talk of what constitutes his center.

What emanates from the two processes discussed so far, namely, the process of experiencing persons and the process of establishing a center of fidelity, is the process of relating to a community. Here a young person can have the profoundly enriching experience of relating himself to a community of persons who share his center of fidelity. Within a single school setting it may be possible to have numerous such communities, offering students the chance to relate to those persons whose center of fidelity is common to their own. Then learning to live in a school (society) with many such communities would be an invaluable experience in maintaining a single society that allows for a pluralism of community situations.

Persons, fidelity, and community: these are fundamental values involved in the aspiration to be human. In the present desert of technological society, it is possible to experience these values in the oasis of encounter. The primary task of a school is to become that oasis. □

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