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Trudge Toward Freedom: Education in Troubled Times

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Gwendolyn Brooks, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in the early 1950's, never left the neighborhood or the themes that animated her entire life—the people, the families, and especially the youngsters of Chicago's southside. She was Poet Laureate of Illinois for many years, a public intellectual and well-known citizen, a teacher with a huge following of both students and admirers. Her notable and most widely-anthologized poem is, "The Pool Players Seven at the Golden Shovel" or more commonly, "We Real Cool":

We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.

When Gwendolyn Brooks passed away there was a moving all-day memorial for her at Rockefeller Chapel near our home where family and friends came together to celebrate her life and her huge contribution to literature and to humanity. On that day Anthony Walton, one of her students, read a poem he'd written for the occasion called simply "Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)":

Sometimes I see in my mind's eye a four- or five-
year-old boy, coatless and wandering

a windblown and vacant lot or street in Chicago
on the windblown South Side. He disappears
but stays with me, staring and pronouncing
me guilty of an indifference more callous
than neglect, condescension as self-pity.

Then I see him again, at ten or fifteen, on the corner,
say, 47th and Martin Luther King, or in a group
of men surrounding a burning barrel off Lawndale,
everything surrounding vacant or for sale.
Sometimes I trace him on the train to Joliet
or Menard, such towns quickly becoming native
ground to these boys who seem to be nobody's
sons, these boys who are so hard to love, so hard
to see, except as case studies.

Poverty, pain, shame, one and a half million
dreams deemed fit only for the most internal
of exiles. That four-year-old wandering
the wind tunnels of Robert Taylor, of Cabrini
Green, wind chill of an as yet unplumbed degree—
a young boy she did not have to know to love.

It set me to wondering about some of the less visible and yet somehow central
dimensions of our work—of the practice of teaching and the enterprise of
education—from several different angles of regard:

- From the angle of the four or five year old boy, coatless and wandering...
- From the perspective of that ten or fifteen year old on the corner...
- From the standpoint of the human cargo on a train destined for the cage...
- From the point of view of an adult world caught up in other matters,
indifferent in part, and in other places guided by its theories and its
standards, pursuing its well-intentioned but sometimes blinding case
studies—"condescension as self-pity"...
- And, suddenly, from that surprising and oh-so-hopeful coda: "a young boy
she did not have to know to love"...

With all the contemporary talk of standards, where do we find the ethical? With
all the focus on accountability, who is being taken to task? One person's moral
conclusion turns out to be another's dogma, one's guidelines for the good life

another's genuflection to the status quo. In any case, when morality is invoked in education we should proceed with caution.

Here are four problems or challenges or contradictions in the form of four questions:

1. Where do we locate the moral in education?
2. What is the moral heart and the ethical task of teaching?
3. What can we do to create a positive environment for moral development in our schools, but also in our families and in our communities?
4. What conflicts, difficulties, or moral dilemmas do youngsters themselves raise in the process of their own development?

Where do we locate the moral in education? The short answer is—at the center, and in every fiber, branch, and limb. To attempt to disentangle the moral—matters of right and wrong, normative questions and concerns, aspirations toward the good—from education is to murder both.

Education, of course, is a site of hope and struggle—hope that floats around notions of a future, struggles over everything from what that future should look like to who should participate and on what terms, from what knowledge and experiences are of most value to who should have access and how.

That hope and struggle is manifested and animated each day in every classroom by two powerful, propulsive, and expansive questions that all students—from kindergarten through graduate school—bring with them to school. Largely unstated and implicit, often unconscious, these questions are nonetheless essential. Who in the world am I? and, What in the world are my choices and my chances?

These are in part questions of identity-in-formation, and they are in part questions of geography, of boundaries and of limits but also of aspirations and of possibilities. When our oldest son was in his first months at college and we were checking in by phone, he said to me that he was particularly taken with a philosophy course he was taking. “You never told me about Kierkegaard,” he said, and I thought, “That’s not the half of it.” His location in an expanding universe was altered, as it should have been. Recognition and growth—the moral possibility—was in play.

What is the moral heart and the ethical task of teaching? The fundamental message of the teacher—and I include here the graduate school lecturer, the high school biology teacher, as well as the preschool teacher and everyone in between—

the fundamental message is this: You can change your life. Wherever you've been, whatever you've done, whoever you are, the teacher holds out the possibility of something new, another chance, a change in direction, a different outcome.

There is a moral contract, then, between teacher and students, again largely unstated, improvisational and implied, but nonetheless worth noting, and it goes something like this:

I will do my best on your behalf; I will work hard and I will take you seriously on every appropriate level; in turn, you must—by your own actions and decisions and in your own way—capture your education for yourself. You must seize it, take hold of it, grasp it in your own hands and in your own time.

Teachers must struggle to understand this contract, and should work, then, in two directions at once—to convince students that there is no such thing as *receiving* an education as a passive receptor or vessel, that, in fact, in that direction lies nothing but subservience, obedience, indoctrination and worse—that all real education is self-education; and, second, to demonstrate to students by daily effort and interaction that they are valued, that their humanity is honored, that their growth, enlightenment and liberation are core concerns.

This is, of course, excruciatingly difficult to do, and too many schools, too often, are structured in ways that undermine this essential moral contract. Certainly the schools I work in and know best are organized in important ways around the casual disregard of the humanity of their students, where formal authority supplants moral authority and rule following is substituted for ethical reflection. In these places the toxic habit of labeling students by their deficits and their misbehaviors bullies the intellectual and the ethical heart of teaching off the stage. The language of such places is revealing: Zero Tolerance replaces the teachable moment; grades and rank trump learning and growth; E.M.H., L.D., and T.A.G., substitute for any sense of students as three-dimensional creatures (much like ourselves) with hopes and dreams, aspirations, skills and interests, and capabilities that must somehow be taken into account. This labeling business has run completely amok: a wonderful satire in the *Onion* newspaper begins by proclaiming, “New Study Reveals Millions of American Children Suffering from YTD—Youthful Tendency Disorder.” A front page box contains the ten early warning signs of YTD, things like, “Talks to imaginary friend,” or “Subject to spontaneous outbursts of laughter.” A mother is quoted in the story saying she was concerned to learn her daughter was diagnosed with YTD, but relieved to know that she wasn't a “bad

mother.” Like all satire, it works as it reveals a deeper truth about our predicament.

What can (or should) we do to create a positive environment for moral development in schools, but also in families and communities? The environment is itself a powerful teacher, the critical variable that classroom teachers can discern, critique, build and re-build to everyone’s advantage.

A basic challenge for teachers is to create an environment that will challenge and nurture the wide range of students who actually enter our classrooms. There must be multiple entry points toward learning and a range of routes to success. The teacher builds the context, the teacher’s ideas, preferences, values, instincts, and experiences are worked up in the learning environment. It is essential to reflect about what we value, our expectations and standards—and the dimensions we work with are not just feet and inches but also hopes and dreams. Think about what one senses walking through the door—What is the atmosphere? What quality of experience is anticipated? What technique is dominant? What voice will be apparent?

When I was first teaching, I took my five-year-olds to the Detroit Metropolitan Airport to watch the planes take off and land. The concourse has a powerful message for all of us: move this way, keep moving, move rapidly. To a five-year-old the concourse says, “Run!” It took me three trips to realize that my instruction—stick together, hold hands, don’t run—was over-ruled by the dominant voice of the environment: RUN!

What does the environment say? How could it be improved? Education of course lives an excruciating paradox precisely because of its association with and location in schools. That’s because education is about opening doors, opening minds, opening possibilities; schools, sadly, can over-emphasize sorting and punishing, grading and ranking and certifying. Education is unconditional—it asks nothing in return. School demands obedience and conformity as a precondition to attendance. Education is surprising and unruly and disorderly, while the first and fundamental law of school is to follow orders. An educator unleashes the unpredictable while a routinized and beaten-down school-teacher starts with an unhealthy obsession with classroom management.

Ethics is different from convention, different from simple rule-following in that it involves reflection and thought and judgment. A fifth grade teacher I know begins each year explaining to his students that he has three rules in his classroom: one is

that you can chew gum—the students are amazed—two is that you can wear your hats—the boys in particular look a little ecstatic at this contravening of the official in this tiny, unique, apparently outlaw space—and three is, “This is a community of learners, and you must treat everyone here with respect and compassion—especially when it’s hard to do.” What this teacher has done in this corner of this school is to create an environment for moral reflection and for ethical action. Mistakes will be made, bad behavior and thoughtless action, but there is a framework for learning, for identifying and building upon the teachable moment.

Contrast this to a sign I saw in a Chicago high school cafeteria:

RULES

1. No running.
2. No shouting.
3. No throwing food.
4. No fork fights.

No fork fights? One’s mind boggles imagining the incident that led to the inclusion of the Rule Four. And beyond that, why no fights, or no knife fights? Where is the environment for ethical reflection or creation?

In the opening scene of “Miller’s Crossing,” Joel and Ethan Cohen’s ridiculous and complex portrait of gangster life in America, Johnny Casper, the two-bit thug in the \$200 suit, struggles to explain to the big crime boss, Leo, how he’s been wronged by an associate mobster, Bernie Bernbaum, the “sheeny schmata-boy.”

“I’m talkin’ about character,” he pleads. “I’m talkin’ about—hell, Leo, I ain’t embarrassed to use the word—I’m talkin’ about ethics” (pronounced e-tics).

Indeed, he is. Bernie Bernbaum, it appears, is a cheat and a liar. “When I fix a fight,” Johnny proceeds, “Say I play a three to one favorite to throw a goddam fight. I got a right to expect the fight to go off at three to one.” But, no. Bernie Bernbaum hears of the deal, manipulates the situation, brings in out-of-town money, and the “odds go straight to hell.”

“It’s getting’ so a businessman can’t expect no return from a fixed fight,” says Johnny. “Now, if you can’t

trust a fix, what can you trust?” Without ethics, “we’re back into anarchy, right back in the jungle...That’s why ethics are important. It’s what separates us from the animals, from beasts of burden, beasts of prey. Ethics!”

Leo’s not so sure Johnny’s case is strong. How does he know Bernie’s the problem when lots of other people share the same information? Couldn’t someone else be selling him out? No, Johnny assures him. It must be Bernie; everyone else in the loop is under his direct, terrifying control. And besides, “Bernie’s kind shaky—ethics-wise.”

“Do you want to kill him?” asks Leo.
“For starters,” is the reply.

Most of us most of the time follow the conventions of our culture—most Spartans act like Spartans, most Athenians like Athenians. And for good or not, most Americans act like Americans. It takes an act of will to resist. Individual ethics tell us to be good, and individual virtue is probably a good thing. But community ethics asks us to wonder how we behave collectively, how our society behaves, how the contexts of politics, economics, culture, and history interact with what we hold to be the ethical. Here things become denser and more difficult. Johnny Casper is trying to be “ethical” in a corrupt and inhumane enterprise. During the time of slavery there were surely honest overseers and law-abiding slave owners, but in what sense were they ethical?

A basic challenge to teachers is to stay wide-awake to the world, to the concentric circles of context in which we live and work. Teachers must know and care about some aspect of our shared life—our calling after all, is to shepherd and enable the callings of others. Teachers, then, invite students to become somehow more capable, more thoughtful and powerful in their choices, more engaged in a culture and a civilization. More free. More ethical. How do we warrant this invitation? How do we understand this culture and civilization?

Teachers choose—they choose how to see the world, what to embrace and what to reject, whether to support or resist this or that directive. As teachers choose, the ethical emerges.

Toward the end of Amir Maalouf's dazzling *Samarkand*, a historical novel of the life of Omar Khayam and the journey of the *Rubiayat*, Howard Baskerville, a British school teacher in the city of Tabriz in old Persia at the time of the first democratic revolution, explains an incident in which he was observed weeping in the marketplace:

"Crying is not a recipe for anything," he begins, "Nor is it a skill. It is simply a naked, naïve and pathetic gesture." But, he goes on, crying is nonetheless important. When the people saw him crying they figured that he "had thrown off the sovereign indifference of a foreigner," and at that moment they could come to Baskerville "to tell me confidentially that crying serves no purpose and that Persia does not need any extra mourners and that the best I could do would be to provide the children of Tabriz with an adequate education." "If they had not seen me crying," Baskerville concludes, "they would never have let me tell the pupils that this Shah was rotten and that the religious chiefs of Tabriz were hardly any better."

Teaching occurs in context, and pedagogy and technique are not the well-springs of moral choice. Teaching becomes the practice of freedom when it is guided by an unshakable commitment to working with human beings to reach the full measure of their humanity, and a willingness to reach toward a future fit for all.

As noted earlier, the fundamental message of the teacher is: You can change your life. Here we might add a necessary corollary: You must change the world.

What conflicts, challenges, and contradictions do youngsters themselves raise in the process of their own development? Too many to enumerate. Just as a two-year-old must turn her back on her mother and the security of family in order to find herself—the ubiquitous No, No, No of the so-called terrible twos—so a twelve-year-old must find herself in part by pushing away, broadening her base of affiliation, finding values, meaning, and a cause to commit to beyond the safety but also the constraints of home. And just as adults can be deceived by the two-year-old's use of language into thinking we share an entirely common meaning, so adults can be confused by the grown-up bodies and sophisticated intelligence of adolescents and assume that we share an identical moral space.

In reality the coming of age of the young is always a little scary—the kids are overwhelmed with the changes going on inside themselves and painfully aware of their limitations as they stride into adulthood. Emblematic adolescents in literature and popular culture are deeply good, acting always with the best of intentions and even heroically, but they are typically uncomfortable with their transformations and surprised by their powers—Spiderman for example—and society inevitably misunderstands them—Edward Scissorhands comes to mind. The adults feel the implied or explicit criticism of our failures, the gaps and deficiencies in the world we’ve left to them. “You’re hypocrites and liars,” they shout, and we can’t stand the sound of it. “We can do it better,” they insist, and we assume a defensive crouch. In *The Winter’s Tale* Shakespeare wrote: “I would that there were no age between ten and three and twenty, or that boys would simply sleep out the rest, for there is nothing in between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancestry, stealing and fighting.”

Knowing what the game is, we can surely do better. And, the game can be summed up in two lines from another poem by Gwendolyn Brooks called “Boy Breaking Glass”:

“I shall create! If not a note then a hole. If not an
overture then a desecration.”

Education is in part a matter of opening the creative vent, the inventive and the productive option, so that alternatives can be seen and chosen, so that the destructive can be challenged and even closed.

In his advice to his fellow poets Pablo Neruda wrote:

To whoever is not listening to the sea
This Friday morning, to whoever is cooped up
In house or office, factory
Or street or mine or dry prison cell,
To him I come and without speaking or looking
I arrive and open the door or his prison,
And a vibration starts up, vague and insistent,
A long rumble of thunder adds itself
To the weight of the planet and the foam,
The groaning rivers of the ocean rise,
The star vibrates quickly in its corona
And the sea beats, dies, and goes on beating.

So, drawn on by my destiny,
I ceaselessly must listen to and keep
The sea's lamenting in my consciousness,
I must feel the crash of the hard water
And gather it up in a perpetual cup
So that, wherever those in prison may be,
Wherever they suffer the sentence of the autumn,
I may be present with an errant wave.
I move in and out of windows,
And hearing me, eyes may lift themselves,
Asking "how can I reach the sea?"
And I will pass to them, saying nothing,
The starry echoes of the wave,
A breaking up of foam and quicksand,
A resulting of salt withdrawing itself,
The gray cry of sea birds on the coast.

So, through me, freedom and the sea
Will call in answer to the shrouded heart.

If we take the dry poison cell to be ignorance, cynicism, hopelessness, and all the entanglements of mystification and easy belief, and if we take the sea's lamenting and the errant wave to represent a wider world and the hope for human liberation, then we see this as the teacher's obligation as well, and further, the activists' obligation, the obligation of every purposeful life. Martin Luther King, Jr. believed that the arc of the moral universe is long, but that it bends toward justice. This is not a scientific conclusion nor an established fact, but rather an expression of hope for a world that could be, but is not yet, a world that requires us to act on behalf of freedom and enlightenment.

A hope for humanity itself.