

LETTER

My (Unusual) Methodology as a Teacher

I wrote this letter to the then chairman of the Philosophy Department at Boston University, during my first year as a Teaching Fellow on my way to the PhD. Looking back, I'd say that my social function was (and still is) to challenge people to shift from ego to essence. — A.K. 3/8/2025

4/4/1971

Dear Dr. Wartofsky,

One of my students came to me on Friday with the surprising request that I continue the seminars I am now giving next year. He then told me his personal story, and as I sat there listening to him, my own intimations as to what has been happening to the students during this semester were recognized as not delusions after all. Catching his own excitement, I grew more and more thrilled at the possibility of continuing these seminars. The best way to convey to you our mutual feelings about this course is to begin by telling you his story, as it came to me:

He said that he “understood” in the 6th grade (!) that his “education” was “irrelevant,” “boring,” “stifling.” Rather than drop out, he made then a secret vow to himself to divorce his life from his education, and as far as school was concerned, to just “go through the motions,” just “follow the rules.”

During these past few months, he said that he has “come alive again,” and now sees “learning” as “growth,” as vital to his life. His former contempt for “abstract ideas,” and for “hard work” has vanished. To his utter surprise, he now feels the need for discipline and for tradition as a personal necessity — a tool to aid him in his own growth.

He also told me that the other (all freshmen) students who attend regularly (10 or 11 out of 15) feel the same way. I think he overstates: I am of the opinion that few of the other stories would be quite so dramatic, nor would they be told with *such* intensity.

Moreover, I know my impact on the sophomores has not been so profound. Yet, with these qualifications, I feel he is right.

What follows will be an attempt to let you and me both understand what has been going on in that seminar, as the direction it took was certainly not known by me in advance, and will, undoubtedly, suffer in the telling of it.

The course this semester has been (as you might guess) continuous with my own life, my own personal and intellectual struggles. Someone once asked me: “how do you see your role as a teacher?” I answered then, without blinking: “to help each of my students discover the child inside of him.” A charming psychoanalytic piece of nonsense. And even to invoke socratic support for it pulls Socrates down to the same banal level. But — I really meant it. And it is this intense conviction which has led me through all of those (often stranded) hours with my students.

I believe: that the discovery of one's own voice is born of the internal dialectical mediation between the child and the man. That one's own voice is the expression of one's own truth, conveyed through the finding of a language within which this truth can be shared. The *need* for “discipline,” for “learning within a tradition” (i.e., scholarship) *comes* to one naturally as an outgrowth of this internal struggle — and is given perspective as the problems of expression and communication.

A lot of schmaltz, this. So read it as metaphor, not as a thesis. Obviously the fertility of such an over-worked idea bears fruit only in practice. And for that one needs working techniques.

My techniques

What I have attempted to do is to take over Agassi's methodology (find a problem which is “real” to you, not “fake,” and then write write write) and make it a part of my own methodology — which is to unearth (when demanded) the hidden assumptions which give this method as a set of rules, its point. The method, both in its implicit and explicit forms, is of course a reflection of the vague but real idea that genuine learning results not from passive acquisition of “ideas,” but from an active personal struggle with them. What I've tried to do is 1) to guide the student into that struggle, and then 2) to help him when he is in danger of drowning there. i.e., I try to focus — in ways specific to the troubles of a particular student — on the delineation of the *character* of that struggle as I have experienced it.

To give you a more detailed idea of what I mean here, I will try to picture the sort of interaction between guide and student which has proved helpful in leading him into his own particular battle:

Not surprisingly, there seems to be a definite pattern of responses to the teacher which the teacher undergoes when he takes this method (as a set of rules) on “faith” and tries to put it into practice. For example, there seem to be two initial pitfalls on the way to finding one's own internal arena, which occur sequentially, and if either is succumbed to, the result is fatal for the method.

The first is bafflement: one starts to “obey” the advice, to “write write write,” “anything and everything” and one soon comes up against a feeling of confusion, of not knowing one's way about, of being lost in a maze. One feels that one wouldn't know what a “real” problem looked like, even if it was always under one's nose. (shades of LW.)

When this point is reached, most students stop, and conclude that the method itself is a fake. When I am greeted with this reaction, my advice to the student is to turn this bafflement itself into a problem: “why do I feel baffled?”

If a student takes this advice seriously, and continues to write, the next response, inevitably, is hostility. Real anger. I've been accused of “taking people on *my* trip,” of

“playing a power-game.” My advice is the same, turn this response of yours into a problem: “why do I feel so hostile?” (My own reality here, my own *equal* passion when confronted with *such* anger in a student seems to be *crucial* to whether or not he continues).

If he still keeps going, he invariably comes to recognize that his own failure to find a real problem is a reflection of his “repressed” feeling that he has nothing to say, that he is nothing, that he is not real. That reality is outside of him, that the only people who say real things are those who write books.

At this point, the books I have required them to read (R.D. Laings') and which they have previously, dutifully, “read,” are suddenly discovered — and are re-read, this time with hunger, and critically, as aids, or tools for understanding their own lives as they begin to write and read on their own, voraciously, with no prodding from me.

Their views of themselves and of me in relation to them have undergone a subtle but dramatic change. I'm no longer seen as the hated and feared authority. They no longer see themselves as unequal, oppressed, “stupid.” The reality and others — yet this isn't a passive tolerance (the hippie “you do your thing, I'll do mine”) but rather intense and active. Who am I? Who are you? Where do we come from? Where are we heading? Where do we *choose* to head? — all those four-year-old questions, with all that four-year-old freshness — emerge again. But unlike the four-year-old, the questions are now seen from within a framework — which, through the process of internally struggling, is beginning to be recognized as just that — as a framework — socially learned, not static, but mutable, through individual and cooperative effort.

I could go on with this. But is there any real need?

Before I stop, I would like to make a more general point, which is undoubtedly echoed *ad nauseam* by contemporary educational critics.

At the college level, we all emphasize the virtues of “original work,” of “critical appraisal,” of “learning one's tradition.” My question is, can these ideas, which I too endorse, be anything more than disconnected slogans if they are not felt by a person as

necessities arising spontaneously out of his own life? Most students, by the time they've gone through grade school, are well on the way towards the symbolic curse bestowed on them by their high school diploma. All of education seems to be geared not towards learning (organic growth) but towards socializing the child into a culture which is blind to its own deadliness to the life of the individual. Unless he is very very lucky, or very very unusual, a freshman enters B.U. dead to his own capacities for continued growth.

I feel that, until the educational system has been revolutionized to the point where freshmen arrive in the university already alive to themselves, that *each of them should be required to take a course of the kind I have been attempting to give* (still so intuitively, still so fumblingly). Obviously, it is my conviction that people can be reborn, and that it is the responsibility of anyone who teaches at the freshman level to sensitize himself to a new kind of role. We have to reignite the Socratic art of midwifery, and learn to effectively apply it to the cultural cancer of the 20th century.

Sincerely,

Ann (Kreilkamp) Cudmore