On Confirming the Deepest Thing in Another

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In looking at the spiritual task of education today in schools that are avowedly guided by religious groups who are concerned that they offer something that is distinctive, I believe there are certain basics that they apply at all levels of the educational task. I think that those who care enough about this kind of education to foot the costly bill for their children to have it, are going to be increasingly selective and demanding that something unique be given, and it is in this setting that I will try to share a few reflections on what I think constitutes that unique and infinitely precious climate that such schools at their best may be able to provide.

As for the teachers in such schools, I am assuming at the outset that these teachers have at least a strong beginning of competence in the field in which they are to teach. There is no place for incompetence in the religiously rooted educational institution of tomorrow. These institutions will be smaller. They will be chosen and not imposed on parents. The days of "take it or leave it" are over. Incompetence can no longer be hidden as it could in the older authoritarian structures. But after saying this, I must link it to the confession that the question of what will constitute competence in a teacher in the religiously concerned school of tomorrow and how you form and how you choose such teachers is no easy matter to fathom!

Obviously, such a teacher must be saturated with a personal interest in his or her field if it is to be contagious. In certain earlier situations of teaching, there were built-in safeguards that would swiftly eliminate teachers who lacked contagion. I have visited the old Al Azhar University in Cairo that began in the tenth century A.D. This universi-

ty began on a mosque porch where a man who had something to teach would appear and spread his rug or blanket on the floor of the porch, and interested students would come and sit down around him. If he was interesting, they would remain for months or perhaps years listening to his wisdom and exchanging views with him. If he was not, they simply got up and left him, and a dull or incompetent teacher ended up with an empty rug! The medieval Christian university in Europe was little different, for students went from teacher to teacher, and the ones who were saturated with their subject and had important things to say held their students. In these situations there were built-in controls for handling the matter of competence and a capacity to communicate.

When I think of the great teachers that I have personally known, men like Bliss Perry, Alfred North Whitehead, Mark Van Doren, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr or my late colleague, Rufus Jones, they have all, in their teaching, seemed to be confiding things that you had already dimly sensed yourself, but they did it in such a way as to give you glimpses of so much more and of such new levels of meaning that even if they mystified you with their further dimensions of insight, they lured you on.

I have always liked Lincoln Steffens' suggestion in his *Autobiography* that when opening a subject for a student, the teacher might do well to tell him, first of all, of some of the unsolved problems in the field that are still to be tackled and to give him a sense of how little is known, and how many things there are to which he himself might be able to make some significant contribution to their understanding. The genuine humility of such an approach introduces a note of integrity and of openness into the student-teacher relationship from the very outset. At college level, I forsee that we shall some day reach a point where the insignia of rank of professor and student may disappear, and in its place there may emerge only junior and senior fellows at work on the problems in the field.

I have found that it seemed to be an encouragement to men beginning the study of philosophy to remind them that two of the great British empiricists, Berkeley and Hume, at their age already had sketched out in their jottings in the journals or day-books the full outline of all that their later philosophy was to depict in developed form; and to note that their own fresh insights and the queries that

they found themselves setting to each of the problems these men focussed upon were highly important and might bring out fresh angles that had never been accented in precisely this fashion before.

I have long been an admirer of still another great teacher whom I did not mention earlier, namely of Martin Buber. I cannot think of a better way to introduce another quality of an inwardly centered teacher than to describe an incident that took place over twenty years ago at Haverford College. In about 1950, I had heard that Martin Buber expected to be in the United States for a visit and had arranged for him to be a guest for several days at Haverford College almost immediately after his arrival from Israel. I had secretly hoped that he might inspire the faculty as well as the students by his insights and by the example of his skill as a teacher.

In those days, each Thursday, late in the morning, we had half an hour when the whole college, faculty and students, crossed a little bridge and trooped up a blocklong path to the Quaker Meeting House where we sat together in a religious exercise based on corporate silence. Martin Buber walked over to the Meeting House with me, and on the way I explained to him the Quaker way of breaking the silence with a brief message if the Spirit quickened him to do it. I explained that no one would formally invite him, that no message was expected from him, but that if something came to him that he wanted to share with the four hundred students and staff gathered there, that he might simply rise and share it and then sit down again and the silence would continue. He told me that he had been in some Quaker meetings in London and knew the procedure, but assured me that as a guest, he would never dream of breaking the silence. I said that this was fine but that I simply wanted him to know the way of proceeding.

The meeting convened and after ten minutes or so Gilbert White, the President of the College, rose and spoke of what a great thing it was that people could meet each other across barriers of race, of nationality, of economic status, of age and could reach out and touch each other. He amplified this by several telling illustrations. He had barely sat down when Martin Buber rose in his place, looking with his beard and his strong face and piercing eyes much as I would picture one of the Old Testament prophets, and after leisurely taking in the whole group with his eyes, he began to speak. He told us that it was a great thing to transcend barriers and to meet another human

being, but that *meeting* another across a barrier was not the greatest thing that one man could do for another. There was still something greater. The greatest thing, he continued, that any man could do for another was to *confirm* the deepest thing he has within him. After this, he sat down as abruptly as he had risen. There was little more to say. And there is little more to say about the greatest thing that a teacher can do for a student. He can believe in him; he can have faith, especially at times when all the conventional indicators point the other way in the student; and he can confirm the deepest thing the student has within him.

Anthony Bloom, a leading Russian Orthodox man of the spirit who lives in London, tells, in an autobiographical chapter that introduces a recent book of his, of an experience that he counts as the initial quickening of the spiritual core in him.

> I was sent to a boy's summer camp when I was about eleven years old and there I met a priest who must have been about thirty. Something about him struck me—he had love to spare for everyone and his love wasn't conditioned by whether we were good and it never changed when we were bad. It was an unconditioned ability to love. I had never met this in my life before. I had been loved at home but I found it natural. I had friends too, and that was natural, but I had never met this kind of love. At the time I didn't trace it to anything. I just found this man extremely puzzling and extremely loveable. . . . This experience I think was the first deep spiritual experience I ever had.

It might be well to remember that for a teacher it may be easier to do this for a bright student than for one who is not in the ninety-ninth percentile! How important it is to recall that the greatest spiritual genius in France in the nineteenth century was probably the Curé D'Ars, and that he was apparently a D– student by any respectable French academic pattern of measurement. I have always been touched by Martin Buber's telling us somewhere that early in his career as a teacher in Jerusalem, he selected only the top students academically for his limited-sized classes. Later he took students as they came and found it much more satisfactory. I suspect that a teacher who can take what God gives him and find the center in each that needs confirming, is the most acceptable to God. How many men and women can point

back to a teacher who saw and believed in them when they neither saw nor believed in this deepest thing in themselves, and can witness to its decisiveness in their own self discovery and subsequent life quest? The teacher did not put the deepest thing there. It was there already. But he confirmed it.

Thomas Kelly was a colleague of mine in teaching philosophy at Haverford College for almost five years until his sudden death in 1941 at the age of forty-seven. His *Testament of Devotion,* which is a devotional classic of the flavor of Brother Lawrence's *The Practice of the Presence of God,* has been translated into a number of languages and has been widely read. After his own college years in a small Midwestern college, he spent the year of 1913–14 at Haverford College where he came as a graduate student to study under Rufus Jones. He came to Dr. Jones's study during the first week of his time at Haverford, and in the course of their visit, he blurted out, "I want to make my life a miracle." Instead of cutting him down to size or passing this over as a young man's emotional extravagance, Rufus Jones quietly confirmed this deepest longing in Thomas Kelly, and before his life span was out, he *did* become a miracle—a miracle that long after his death is still moving many of his readers to confront the one thing needful. Every student, like every man or woman, has this same secret longing to have his life a miracle. A teacher of real faith and humility is often able to nurture and to confirm this secret longing. At Rufus Jones's memorial service in 1948, a former student of his put it all in four words, "He lit my candle."

I personally owe everything to such a man who taught English Literature at the agricultural college that I attended in Michigan. I never took a course from him, but he became my friend, and in a critical year, he was expendable in time and in confidence, and he confirmed in me a decision to leave agriculture and move into philosophy about which I knew almost nothing in any formal sense. But far more than helping me in this drastic vocational shift, he trusted me and he helped bring back my faith in my having something to give.

Many sincere and able teachers in religiously concerned educational institutions have times when they feel that a kind of invisible barrier has swept in like a cloud of fog from the sea and has cut them off from their students. They find their own religious tradition in which they have felt secure being ruthlessly searched by their students who seem

no longer even to start from the teacher's presuppositions. Some of these teachers have found not only comfort but penetration of this cloudy barrier when they have seen the concern that these very students have shown not only for lifting the curtain of pain and injustice in near and distant places, but for their yearning for great music, for the drama, for the creative arts, for the crafts and very especially for nature. Paul Tillich did much to call attention to the significance for true religion that belongs in the operative presence of this depth dimension in man, a dimension which our Roman Catholic brothers have often referred to as "general Revelation." Tillich sensed this depth dimension in Jungian psychology's pointing beyond the empirical or "Who's Who" self to a healing, integrative core or ground that can draw persons back to health if they can reestablish creative relations with it. He found it in painting and saw mirrored in Picasso's *Guernica* a vision of the "brokenness" of modern man in his unredeemed condition. Late in his life, he was fascinated with the depth levels of consciousness that his Zen Buddhist friends revealed to him. He would have been the first to reassure religiously oriented teachers that as long as you have this depth dimension in so many areas operating in your men and women, you have a threshold, a living layer of spiritual seeking to learn from and to confront. This may in the end be a far more fruitful condition of the soul to speak to with great literature and philosophy and history, than the so-called previous ages of faith when the lid was on and all things were more tidily in their appointed places!

When I invited Martin Buber to Haverford College in 1950, I mentioned before that I had the faculty as well as the students in mind. For only when the faculty are in growth and are learning from each other and learning from the students and are continually rethinking their approach to their field can you possibly have a maximal climate for learning to take place all across the board in the school. I knew that Martin Buber had had a small and intimate circle in Frankfurt which met for an evening each week and which two of my German friends had testified was an electrifying experience and one that searched them to their depths. I had always hoped for some American equivalent of this, perhaps at Haverford, and during Buber's visit to a sizable group of the faculty one afternoon, I sought to draw from him the secret of this Frankfort group's intense and con-

tinuing aliveness. He thought for a time and then exploded with a single word, *Rucksichtlosigkeit*—this is, to follow the argument ruthlessly wherever it goes, with no holds barred, and with a determination to press through to the full truth involved. This all-out honesty with each other, he felt kept the way open for experiences of new insight and truth to break through.

This experience with Buber recalls in my mind a similar circle around Theodore Haecker in Munich that kindled its members and had rich results. It also makes me think of a small band of secondary school teachers who were gathered together by Georg Picht during the years he was headmaster of the Birkelhofschule at Hinterzarten in the Black Forest. Georg Picht chose these men of course for their abilities in teaching the various subjects in the humanities. But he also made sure of their proficiency in Greek and their keenness in cooperating in a joint project of producing a Plato Dictionary. These men taught their various subjects with a great abandon in the school by day, but nights and weekends and vacations, they worked like beavers on this Plato Dictionary and found the experience both fascinating and exhilarating and found it quickening the whole sweep of their teaching and their educational enterprise. I must add one more example of this kind of teacher collaboration in an exciting project. It centered around Rudolf Steiner and the famous Waldorfschule in Stuttgart. Before the first World War Steiner had drawn together a sizable group of German people in a fresh and very free religious movement called Anthroposophy. Toward the close of the war his followers demanded that a school be set up for their children and that Steiner, this religious genius, should fashion a fresh pedagogy that would guide the school and help to prepare the children for the life-stance of their religion.

Steiner went to work and by the close of the war he had produced a series of highly innovative practices for a new school. There was to be handcraft for the elementary school children from the very first grade; eurythmics were devised to set the body free. Sympathetic biology (agriculture) was set up so that in proper season the children worked daily in large gardens greeting the plants with love and restoring their own connections with the earth. Modelling in clay was introduced further on in the curriculum which then moved into sculpturing in which often deep inward conflicts were worked through in

the fashioning of a series of heads. Painting and toy-making were not neglected. The teachers in the school were believers in this approach. There was a rigorous form of self-selection operative since the school was only able to pay the teachers about a half of what they would earn in a state school. But the side benefits were inestimable, for each week these teachers gathered for a seminar with Rudolf Steiner, who had devised the pedagogy. The session began when school closed at three and no terminal hour was set! In this weekly seminar the teaching experiences of the week were pooled, failures were probed, and fresh approaches explored. When teachers in a school or college are themselves in growth something spills over into their teaching that is unmistakable.

The kindling and rekindling of the teachers becomes more likely when there is a growing sense of the urgency of certain tasks that are to be faced and the sense that the stakes in this matter of the task are high. John Hersey, in his documentary novel *Hiroshima*, describes the atomic bomb explosion in the center of the city of Hiroshima and the incineration of those within the immediate range of the bomb. In the same instant, houses in the further ranges of the bomb's perimeter were collapsed, and many people trapped under rafters and beams were unable to extricate themselves and faced the horror of the fires spreading everywhere.

The universal impulse was to flee the city toward the country, and the streets were crowded with hurrying people. Hersey tells of the agonized cries of imprisoned people pinned down in these collapsed houses calling out for help and of these hurrying crowds seemingly utterly oblivious of anyone but themselves. Hersey suggests that most in the crowd seemed to be too self-absorbed in their own survival even to hear the cries. He adds, however, that there were others who certainly heard those cries but partitioned themselves off from touching any center of responsibility by assuming that the police, the army, or the Japanese equivalent of the Red Cross corps would take care of them. But this is not all. Hersey goes on to speak of how here and there, some hurrying refugee would hear a cry, would drop out of the crowd, pick his way into the collapsed building, and give a hand to releasing the trapped person and helping him to escape. Teachers in religiously guided schools and colleges in the period in which we live must face the issue of how you produce this third type of effectively

compassionate people: people who hear, people who refuse to run for cover in assigning the task to institutional agencies, and people who are not afraid to drop out of line to respond to the need. For Christian education with its Gospel story of the Jericho Road as a pivotal parable in their great tradition, cannot shrug off the "Hiroshima problem."

Arthur Gossip, a much revered Scottish Protestant minister, tells of how he came to the late afternoon of an exhausting day visiting his parishioners in a working district of Glasgow and at four o'clock stood at the foot of a five-story tenement building where one of his parishioners lived on the top floor. He said that he was feeling exhausted and said to himself, "I'll go home now, and come back tomorrow." At that point, a vision of a pair of stooped grey shoulders started slowly up the steps and a voice seemed to say, "Then I'll have to go alone." He concluded, "We went together."

How in the educational experience of the young in our schools we can provide climates of expectancy and self-abandonment is the task laid on a teacher in a religiously concerned school and one that we dare not evade. It is no good brushing aside this responsibility by insisting that the whole social system that permits wars and atomic bombs and permits Glasgow tenements must be changed. The men and women who will work tirelessly for those lasting changes must know this inward center where they dare leave the crowd or where they dare mount the steps of need regardless of the self-preservative substances that sluice through their blood streams.

What the voluntary work camps of the past generation provided in the way of exposure to the urgent needs of deprived people, both domestically and abroad, and the deep satisfactions to be found in some of the small steps to remedy conditions in which their own bodies (Franciscan-like) were involved, must become a part of the total educational process and would, if it were woven into it, do much to temper the lassitude and boredom of sixteen years of bookish education.

It was deeply confirming to me to attend a conference of the Deans and a number of the leading professors of the Eastern and Midwestern medical schools some years ago and to find them wrestling with the steady deterioration of the sense of social responsibility in their medical students as they passed through the three years of their medical

school training. They had checked this with a very carefully devised set of sociological tests and it showed that each year the social responsibility quotient of the medical student in training went a sizable notch further down. There was only one leading medical school where the score bucked the tide. This school was found to expose its medical students to hospital rounds with bed patients from their very first months of entering the medical school. Apparently the close and existential personal touch with the sick had a quickening turn to the Hiroshima "third way" or the Glasgow stair-mounting decisions and it altered their score from the trend of those students who had only theoretical instruction until their very concluding semesters! How close all of this is to getting at the motivational springs of education in both teacher and student about which we know so little but which religiously concerned schools, if they have any real justification, simply dare not neglect.

I will close this cluster of reflections about the teacher and his role in a religiously concerned educational institution by sharing with you a word of one of our great teachers in the past generation, Columbia's Mark Van Doren, whose long career there as a teacher of literature has left its stamp on our time. I once got him to come to Haverford to address a banquet given to a group of a hundred young men collected from our neighboring institutions and our own college who showed high intellectual promise and whom we hoped to interest in considering college teaching as a professional career. Near the close of his address, Mark Van Doren told this group that when he took hold of the doorknob of his own classroom to enter it for his lectures, he always paused. It was holy ground, a holy opportunity! Would he be able to measure up to it? Can we be given the grace to help to share in this anticipatory awe? Einstein says that "he who can no longer stand wrapt in awe and wonder is no longer alive." Can our profession be helped to recover a larger measure of this aliveness?

The Wider Quaker Fellowship
a program of the Friends World Committee for Consultation
(Section of the Americas)
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1983