Criticism and the Experts

The present government of the U.S. is talking about reforming the educational system and the health care system. It is clear that the insurance companies and other components of the medical establishment aren't going to be inconvenienced by the reforms. Teachers, on the other hand, are increasingly being made the scapegoats for our national decline. I want to propose that an orientation toward results, rather than procedures, is the essential reform that we need in both health care and education. The goals of both health care and education, I think, are to maximize abilities and pleasures, minimizing disabilities and displeasures. The World Health Organization has defined health in terms of decreasing dysadaptations, and improving our adaptation to our surroundings.

As Felix Meerson (described in my monograph "Resistance of the heart") has shown, the brain is the preferred organ of adaptation, because adaptation on the level of learning has no biological costs, in the sense of limiting our structure and function. As soon as we submit to a cultural stereotype or a textbook answer, we give up our creative capacity to adapt mentally, and begin to avoid problems, questions, and mysteries, because adaptation at any level other than creative imagination is a bodily stress; the acceptance of authority commits a person to wielding any authority they have, or helplessly adapting to the authority of others. Full health requires the responsible and creative use of the mind. This is why I think it is necessary to consider the reform of health care and education together, as a single project of cultural reform.

Certain things led me into a habit of doubting the experts. For example, in high school I had a state-certified biology teacher who refused to mention the word "evolution," an American history teacher who worshipped Hitler, and a "civics" teacher who told race jokes in class. Although it wasn't their apparent intention, they were contributing something to my education. In a graduate school seminar in American literature, I mentioned the relevance of social class to the work of some writer, and the professor interrupted to tell me that "there are no classes in the United States"; I explained that I didn't mean class or caste in the legally enforced sense that India and England have them, but social-economic classes. At that, every student in the seminar joined with the professor to make it clear that I couldn't go on with my discussion if I had to refer to the "non-existent" social classes. That same summer term, I was looking for a job at a community college, and just a few hours' drive from the great university I found myself in the midst of horrifying unimaginable squalor. My fellow students had grown up in that region, and had to know about those areas. They helped to make me aware that there are academic fetish-ideas. Later I would find that the sciences were just as susceptible to academic fetishes, but that the humanities had the advantage of a tradition that emphasizes critical judgement; while the sciences base undergraduate education heavily on textbooks, the humanities emphasize study of original materials.

Over a period of several years, I enrolled as a graduate student in seven other departments, and learned to orient myself to what I perceived as a general academic psychosis, with variations to suit the subject matter; no department, from art to zoology, was free from the crazy authoritarianism, but a small percentage of individuals in any discipline seemed able to avoid the dogmatic frenzy. Once, in the late 1960s, I tried to communicate my perception to students at the University of Oregon. I organized a course called "Interdepartmental Perspectives on the Nature of Man." We invited the most highly-thought-of professors from ten departments to lecture on "their discipline's special contribution to understanding human nature." We had professors from the sciences, social science, philosophy and religion, rhetoric, and folklore. Six weeks into the course, we had heard six professors deliver one or two-hour lectures on the central importance of Noam Chomsky's generative grammar for understanding the nature of man. After the sixth lecture, one of the students took me aside and said "You're playing a trick on us, aren't you?" Since I had emphasized that the professors should talk about their department's special contribution, I wasn't responsible for the embarrassing stereotypy of their lectures, but in fact, that student had understood my reason for organizing the class. In a later decade, "deconstructionism" might have been the specific content of the lectures, but the point would still be that the university curriculum consists largely of stylish, borderline-psychotic, garbage. (Seen from a certain viewpoint, that academic stuff seems neither trashy nor crazy, but rather elegant, noble, and relevant. You have to adopt that viewpoint to write an A paper; you have to discard that viewpoint to do something useful. The desire for useful knowledge leads to an attitude of active criticism.)

The academic sciences and humanities are similar in their fear of responsibility for knowledge. Everyone marches in step, assigns the right textbooks, and holds the acceptable assumptions, so that they can keep their job. Ultimately (and frequently enough to keep people in line) the board of trustees exercises its power to herd the university faculty in the desired direction.

Because of my own experiences as a critical student, in 1959 or 1960 I conceived of having a college whose teachers and students were the trustees. (We called it Blake College, for William Blake.) Responsibility would be institutionalized, to some extent. To keep students from feeling that they were leaving the real world when they entered the college, I proposed that it should grant degrees based on "recognized achievement," and I specifically suggested that the BA degree should require a score above the 87th percentile on the Graduate Record Examination, since this score alone should be enough to gain admittance to any good graduate program. In fact, private universities generally recognized that a GRE score higher than that of 87% of the graduates from recognized US colleges was a reasonable basis for graduate admission, but the state universities required that their applicants have degrees from "accredited institutions." (Our students all received their degrees, and their GRE scores averaged at the 95th percentile. A couple of our students had previously been ranked in the lowest 10% academically. A change of their feelings about knowledge changed their mental abilities.) The regional accrediting association told us that they would consider many factors, including the size of our endowment and whether we had a football team, and made it clear that they were a kind of mafia that wasn't sympathetic with our idea of

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requiring that every graduate have a high level of intellectual competence.

What this means is that competence is defined as a) enrolling in the institutions presently established by governmental authority; b) jumping through ten to forty hoops per year, for a certain number of years; the size and height of the hoops are set by the authorities in consultation with the experts; c) in certain cases, one or two flaming hoops may be required, to exalt the authority of the profession. Art Pearl, a professor of education, used to argue that students should be awarded their degrees when they enroll in college, since the degrees don't stand for any special competence now, and the recognition of that would make people think about the actual qualifications needed for doing a job. If we compare education to the rites of initiation many cultures have, then symbolizing entry into adulthood with a college degree, earned by a feat of endurance, isn't so strange, but the ritual could be modified so that it didn't interfere with learning the things people really want to learn.

After people have proven their obedience/compliance, by years of expensive subservience, then they may be allowed to take certain licensing exams. By law, these tests are not sufficient evidence of competence, and only those who hold accredited professional degrees may take them. If people without degrees were allowed to take the licensing exams, it might be discovered that the endurance-training had a detrimental effect on the students' problem-solving abilities. Several years ago, it was discovered that students' IQs decreased with each additional year they spent in certain schools. In a study of graduate students, it was found that there was an inverse relationship between their academic standing and their distance from the mean IQ, in either direction, that is, the mean IQ is excellent academically.

If we are concerned with what people know and are able to do, then we can find ways to help them develop the knowledge and ability that they want. However if that goal is a fraud, and we really want a nation of obedient, submissive, rigid and uncritical people who don't rock any boats, then we should just worry about keeping guns and drugs out of the schools (remember the math graduate student who murdered his professor?) and otherwise keep the educational system as it is, with emphasis on form, rather than outcome.

The idea of testing for competence (with varying degrees of generality, relating to specific tasks or ability to respond to novelty) would fundamentally change our educational institutions, but its influence would extend into the workplace. Many jobs would disappear if everyone's competency improved. In medicine, people talk about payment for keeping the patient well, instead of for alleviating or curing disease, but keeping the public healthy is going to require a major social effort to keep food, water, air, homes, travel and workplaces safe. If people become aware of their potential for creative adaptation and problem solving, the whole direction of the economy must change, because status and style-dependent consumption derive their importance from the absence of intrinsic interest in many of our activities.

Active criticism is an old idea that is close to "imaginative science." B.G. Niebuhr is considered to have founded German historiography with his concept of criticizing the source documents. Goethe used the phrase "tatige skepsis" (active doubt, constructive criticism) to describe Neibuhr's method. William Blake emphasized that criticism and imagination must be combined to correct error; doubt by itself is futile, imagination is vulnerable without organized and active criticism. More recently, Salvador Dali's concept of "critical paranoia" advocated the same intelligent use of the brain, to discover what is true, important, and interesting in ambiguous situations. Meerson, the investigator of stress physiology, speaks of adaptive culture as the first level of protection against harmful conditions.

For about 50 years, the concept "psychosomatic" has been trivialized to mean "it's just imaginary." But now, the studies of the physiology of helplessness show that a seemingly small difference in experience and attitude can cause a very great difference in the ability to mobilize biological energy and various aspects of immunity, such as Natural Killer cell activity. There is now general agreement on the distinction between the demobilized state of helplessness and the state of active adaptation. If everyone could be "vaccinated" against helplessness, there would be a general improvement in health and ability to learn. But irrational institutions keep making helpless people. A culture which promoted a responsible, creative use of critical intelligence would minimize the experience of helplessness; and at the same time it would shift our adaptive habits upward, toward seeking reasonable imaginative solutions to problems that now are often perceived as stresses and threats.

After my experience at Blake College, in which the essence of the institution was to support the inclination of students and teachers toward being responsible for knowledge, I found that it was often possible to reinterpret institutional rules to create a similar temporary environment within the existing conventional universities.

The greatest impediment to doing this is probably the fear of unemployment; subscribing to the current academic idiocy, or the current cliche of the marketplace, is felt to be necessary to fit in. In questions of health and education our culture is at a critical point. Things could be reinstitutionalized to give all power to the drug, insurance and communication industries, or they could begin to be de-institutionalized to expand the scope for intelligent individual activity.

Art Pearl's suggestion that students be automatically granted degrees can be seen as the student's equivalent of tenure. If teachers were much more secure about their jobs, there wouldn't be so much pressure to conform. There are foolish and wicked teachers, and good and wise teachers. If students know there are objective standards of achievement, they won't be under the teachers' power; teachers will be challenged by the needs and curiosities of the students. Students will necessarily become conscious of the need to examine and question the source of information. Little kids naturally have that inclination, which is the inclination of good scientists and artists.

The Japanese have relatively high levels of achievement in education. They also invented crawl-in hotel "rooms," stuffers to pack people into subways, and snap-on apartments. Their achievement comes at the price of exhaustion, misery, and diseases of stress. They represent one of our potential futures. The other potential future takes into account our health and happiness, and defines health as having the capacity for creative mental adaptation.

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