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Public Education and the Public Space

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In a long poem called *An Explanation of America*, Robert Pinsky writes:

A boundary is a limit. How can I
Describe for you the boundaries of
this place
Where we were born; where Possi-
bility spreads
And multiplies and exhausts itself
in growing,
And opens yawning to swallow it-
self again?
What pictures are there for that
limitless grace
Unrealized, those horizons ever dis-
solving?

This is a moment of stringency and limit, of grace unrealized, of horizons receding further and further away. If it were not for images of possibility, however, it would be difficult to describe what is lacking, what is wrong. Without some "explanation of America," without a sense of a better order of things, we would not be moved to break through the limits or to repair the insufficiencies we see. But we are educators, and education has to do with new beginnings and reaching toward what is not yet. Whatever our locations, whatever our vantage points, we cannot help but lean into the future. No matter how specialized we are, how technically oriented, we are bound to think about remaking and repairing. We wonder—and how can we help it?—how best to renew.

What are the criteria for renewal? Where are we to turn? We are continually reminded that we can no longer assume the exist-

tence of a consensus where the purposes of public education are concerned; nor can we assume consensus when it comes to professional expertise. It is obvious that faith in the promise of public schools has eroded, along with confidence in what they can offer to the young. We are all aware of a cacophony of demands, most of them focusing on individual achievement and on an assumed connection between achievement and mobility, acceptable performance and success. We hear special interest groups expressing multiple discontents, calling for new kinds of conformity, or for acquiescence to parochial ideals. We see people in their enclaves, people breaking off from what John Donne called "the Continent," refusing to be "part of the maine." (Thinking of the fundamentalists and the creationists and the book-burners and the segregationists, we might well ask ourselves: "For whom *does* the bell toll?")

Most significantly, however, there is little talk today about the connection between public education and freedom, or about the ways in which schools might prevent what Thomas Jefferson called "a perversion into tyranny." Yet this is a time when what we think of as civilization is being ripped apart across the planet by terror, torture, and totalitarian controls. It is a moment when we are instructed daily in the fragility of human rights, in the tenuousness of both freedom and democracy. To speak of freedom is in no sense to speak of separation from the many, from the "maine." Freedom is an achievement within concrete situations, an achievement by human beings involved in the world and with others. To speak of

it is to speak, as John Dewey (1928) did of "something which comes to be, (of) a certain kind of growth" (p. 280). It is to hold in mind the human capacity to orient the self to the possible, to posit alternatives, to look at things as if they could be otherwise. The opposite of freedom is a type of alienation; it is *stasis*, petrification, fixity. It would seem to me that educators, on principle, would want to take a stand against what threatens our way of being in the world; yet the matter seldom enters educational discourse today. And with rare exceptions, nor does any notion of the social good. We protest, of course, the withholding of funds from remedial programs and school lunch programs; we work to maintain support for research intended to improve what happens in our schools. Now and then someone comments on the link between effective schooling and national defense or industrial productivity; literacy is talked of as if it were part of the gross national product. Almost never is there an expressed concern about the public realm; there is silence about renewing the common world and about what that common world should be. What is it that lies in between, that holds us together, that we can cherish and try to keep alive? Where, when we ponder it, *are* we to turn?

Questions like these move me to explore the role that might be played by public education in bringing into being an authentic public space, one that might give rise to a significant common world. I believe that our fundamental difficulties spring from what Dewey (1927) once called "the eclipse of the public" (p. 137). In *The Public and its Problems*, he

This paper was the Presidential Address at the AERA Annual Meeting, New York City, March 1982.

wrote: "There is too much public, a public too diffused and scattered and too intricate in composition. And there are too many publics, for conjoint actions which have indirect, serious, and enduring consequences are multitudinous beyond comparison, and each one crosses the others and generates its own grasp of persons especially affected with little to hold these different publics together in an integrated whole" (p. 219). The point was made more than 50 years ago, but it still rings true. So does Dewey's suggestion that the eclipse of the public was in part due to the lack of a symbolism appropriate to the emerging technological age. As he saw it, the symbols available, like the ideas and ideals current at the time, stemmed from an earlier, far different period in history. There was a dissonance between them and existing socio-economic conditions, as there is a dissonance today between the privatist, voluntarist, laissez-faire ideas that now have such official sanction and the realities of a troubled mass society.

Dewey's remedy was the "search for the great community," something he saw as "a life of free and enriching communion," whose seer could only be Walt Whitman. The great community would emerge, he thought, only if face-to-face communities were reconstructed. Viewing such communities in ever-expanding relationships, he saw them as the only conceivable ground for a public that would finally "find and identify itself." This vision, haunting as it is, seems to be a function of a culture far more stable and integrated than ours, for all its lack of an articulate public. The traditional nuclear family was still the norm; demographic shifts, compared with those we witness at present, were minimal; shopping malls had not eliminated neighborhood stores and gathering places; television had not been invented, and the impact of the media was relatively small. Neighborhood, more or less homogeneous schools were still common. Technocracy had not fully taken hold. Dewey rejected outright the probability of a "government by

experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts of their needs," something that sounds ironic when read today. Also, sadly enough, he assumed that "the problem of minorities" was solved. There is little evidence that he was aware of the diverse languages and the multiple perspectives (or the repressed languages and the hidden perspectives) marking what was coming to be.

The problem of constituting a public space today is of a different order, and not solely because of increased fragmentation. Richard Sennett (1976), like a number of other social scientists, is convincing when he points to the deadness and emptiness in the public domain, and when he speaks of today's pursuit of intimacy as a sign of narcissism and escape. To cherish close community for its own sake, Sennett suggests, is to be a refugee. People are withdrawing from a public culture perceived as meaningless; they are building barricades around their private spaces rather than engaging in the expanding associated relationships Dewey described. If this is the case, it is exacerbated by the distance from the centers of power people experience in these times, by their alienation from the context-free, technical language presently in use. Ordinary, contextual language—the language of face-to-face interchange—now sounds ineffectual against the clicking of simulation games and the whirring of computerized projections. Many persons find themselves in a strange, almost unrecognizable new world. This has intensified the alien quality, the perceived impersonality of what lies outside the private realm. It has drained ordinary meanings from the public domain.

The vacuum is filled by the messages coming from the media which, more often than not, enhance the sense of givenness and objectification. Popular assent, once sought through public meetings and dialogue, is now generated by various kinds of media productions: by the manipulation of images; by what is presented as social scientific certainty, or stark "rationality," or the results of a

policy analysis so tight and logical it cannot be questioned by the layperson. The layperson watches spokespeople watching teleprompters, reading scripts, not knowing what it signifies for his or her life; not knowing what precisely to do, he or she is prone to turn away. The layperson is spectator, consumer, audience, and audiences are not consulted, anymore than consumers are. The point is to sell, to render the product attractive enough, necessary enough to be taken off the shelves. If the ordinary man or woman feels impelled to say something, he or she is most likely to save opinions for close companions or family members who see things in the same way. He or she is certainly not tempted to inform the experts of his or her needs. Indeed, when an individual is moved to articulate desires, it is ordinarily done in an extremely private space. In fact, much of what can be called communication takes place in such a space; the public, therefore, becomes increasingly inarticulate; the sense of powerlessness deepens. Much of it is due to the endless watching and to the fact that, when one customarily talks with those who share one's views, there is no particular need to listen, to pay heed. Dewey (1927) once wrote (as if in anticipation of all this) that "the connections of the ear with vital and outgoing thought and emotion are immensely closer and more varied than those of the eye. Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participant." If we do not take this seriously in education, we may well become accomplices (unless we already are) with those intent on maintaining a society of quiet ones, of mere "job-holders and consumers." To rear a generation of spectators is not to educate at all.

Nor is it to attend to the moral dimension of education, to what might be called the life of conscience. It is painfully evident today that the ongoing mystification and the passivity to which it gives rise have affected the ability to respond to moral demand. On all sides we find the networks of obligation beginning to unravel. Deprived people, distraught people, victims of fire, unemployed work-

ers, women in need of day-care centers, abused children, Haitian refugees: all appear on the nightly news—to be seen. Like the wars fought in our living rooms, they become mere incidents in a continually unrolling pictorial scroll. The sense of injustice, the compassion that once might have moved people to speak out in their own voices and even to take action along with others, have given way to mild pity and a bland indifference. Pity, compared with compassion, distances; indifference deadens inclinations to respond.

Alienation and fixity come to mind again, along with the absence of a public space. There *is* no space where human beings, speaking and acting in their plurality, can appear before one another and realize the power they have simply in being together. And there surely is no such space in most of the schools. Nor is there the freedom experienced when young persons discover that they have the capacity to reach out and attain feelings, thoughts, and ways of being, hitherto unimagined—and even, perhaps, ways of acting on what they believe to be deficient, ways of transcending and going beyond.

There are analogues for this that spring to mind, more than I can recount. Think of what we saw happening in the Gdansk shipyard before the enactment of martial law: men and women speaking in their own voices, saying what they had never dared to say before; steel-workers, writers, television camera people, moviemakers, students appearing before one another, taking action in the open, allowing something common to emerge. Recall some of the moments in the civil rights movement: the afternoons in Reverend Martin Luther King's church, the speaking and acting on the march from Selma to Montgomery. Ponder what occurred in the village of Le Chambon, where (as Philip Hallie, 1979, puts it) "goodness happened" under the Nazi occupation and all the citizens decided to hide and help refugees. One woman says, "You know? Saving refugees was a *hobby* for the people of Le Chambon!" And Hallie

writes: "She meant a hobby in the sense of something done by an untrained amateur, a lover of the thing done. . . . She meant that the people of Le Chambon saved refugees on the side, so to speak, as an avocation, not as part of their vocation, as a way of saving lives, not as a way of making a living" (p. 195). What those ordinary people did, you see, was to create their own common world. And then there is the fictional analogue, in Albert Camus' novel, *The Plague* (1948). You may remember the town of Oran, where everyone was bored

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and devoted to cultivating habits, and how it was afflicted by the plague. People responded in their own ways, most often in solitude, and, at the start, they had only commonplaces to say. Then Tarrou organizes "sanitary squads"; and these groups "enabled our town-folk to come to grips with the disease and convinced them that, now that the plague was among us, it was up to them to do whatever could be done to fight it. Since plague became in this way some men's duty, it revealed itself as what it really was; that is the concern of all" (p. 121). It became the concern of all because it was brought out into the open where they came together to create a public space.

It is undoubtedly because they were together in speech and action that Tarrou and Dr. Rieux could take an hour out for friendship to talk about the plague. Tarrou explains that anyone at all can give way to plague—meaning passivity, indifference, abstractness;

in fact, he knows that everyone in some sense *has* the plague,

And I know, too, that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him. What's natural is the microbe. All the rest—health, integrity, purity (if you like)—is a product of the human will, of vigilance that must never falter. The good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention. And it needs tremendous willpower, a never ending tension of the mind to avoid such lapses. (p. 229).

To "fasten the infection" on someone else is to distance that person, to make him or her an object. To do otherwise requires clarity, Tarrou says, the ability to use "plain, clear-cut language." Moreover, it requires the ability "to take, in every predicament, the victims' side." I would highlight the stress on language and on mindfulness, as I would the concern for attentiveness. To be attentive is to pay heed to the concrete situation in which the thinker-actor is engaged. The point of ethical thinking, after all, is to take appropriate action in response to moral demands. But situations have to be attended to in such a fashion that the lacks, the deficiencies, the inhumanities are disclosed—and, once again, disclosed in a public space. Moreover, they have to be posited as situations presenting alternative possibilities of action, openings through which people can move. What Tarrou does, in effect, is to choose to be ethical in the life he lives with others. This means remaining wide awake to suffering as well as to the principles ("health, integrity, purity") by which he has chosen to live. There is no other way to fight the plague.

It is important to see that Tarrou is speaking in his own voice, as *who* and not *what* he is. When Hannah Arendt (1958) wrote about the public space in *The Human Condition*, she placed great emphasis on those who come together being free to tell their stories, to speak from their own locations in the world. The public space, as she saw it, is defined by

principles that enable diverse human beings to act in common and to be recognized for what they do. ("Responsibility rests upon recognition," says the narrator in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, "and recognition is a form of agreement." He, too, struggling for his own visibility, is striving to appear in public as *who* he is; and his tale ends with talk of a window opening and the words, "I must emerge.") Fundamental to this, for Arendt, is the notion of human plurality which has "the twofold character of equality and distinction." Without equality, persons cannot understand one another or plan for a common future. If they are not distinctive individuals and recognized in their distinctiveness, there is no need for speech and action, since simple sounds would be enough to communicate identical wants and needs. Nor would there be the likelihood of multiple perspectives, the perspectives that derive from the diversity of locations in the world. As Arendt put it, "the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous perception of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised (pp. 57–58). For her, appearance constitutes what we think of as reality, and appearance must be understood as "something that is being seen and heard by others as well as ourselves." Crucial to this view is the realization that all those involved are seeing and hearing the same thing, albeit from their distinctive perspectives. Any particular phenomenon—a tree, a text, a classroom, an epidemic—is bound to present diverse aspects to persons in a plurality. But the tree is there; the text is there, as the refugees were there for the people of Le Chambon and the idea of solidarity for the people at Gdansk.

The implications for classrooms seem to me to be manifold. For one thing, we have learned from much of our research that, in effective classrooms, young people are moved to choose to learn. When they take their own initiatives and when they care about what they

are doing, they are likely to go in search of meanings, to begin learning to learn. We understand also that they are most likely to pose the questions with which learning begins when they feel themselves to be speaking to others, speaking in the first person to those who are different from themselves. When they can articulate what they have to say against the background of their own biographies, they may well be in a position to listen to others—and be listened to—if those others are also speaking for themselves. Tarrow has to tell his own life story to Dr. Rieux before he can explain what he has learned about the plague. "I've had to dwell on my start in life," he says, "since for me it was really the start of everything." Virginia Woolf begins *A Room of One's Own* by saying: "I'm going to do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion about the room and the money. I am going to develop in your presence as fully and freely as I can the train of thought which led me to think this." Ishmael, talking of the "whiteness of the whale" in *Moby Dick*, says (probably to his imagined reader) "But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught."

To be able to do this, even to try to do it, is to be reminded that all reflection (including scientific reflection) begins in lived situations. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964) once wrote: "If we actually reflect on our situation, we will find that the subject, thus situated in the world and submitting to its influences, is at the same time he who thinks the world" (p. 57). Not only is this a way for young people to rouse themselves from passivity, to begin thinking about their own thinking. It may be a way of enabling them to realize that what are called the forms of knowledge are modes of structuring, modes of interpreting their lived and shared reality. Paul Hirst (1965) has said that the forms of knowledge may be conceived to be "the public aspects of the ways in which human experience has come to have shape" and that "the various forms

are firmly rooted in that common world of persons and things which we all share, and into this they take back in subtle as well as simple ways the understanding they have achieved" (p. 137). Put another way and from another philosophical perspective, it may be said that things themselves (including those appearing things Hannah Arendt had in mind) and what we think of as the common world have come into view over time by means of the understanding that has developed and the interpretations that have been devised. The history of each discipline, after all, is a history of provisional perspectives. Think of Giordano Bruno, Galileo, Newton, Einstein; or think of Locke, Rousseau, James, Dewey, Freud, and Piaget. Michael Oakshott (1962) writes about education as an initiation into an age-long conversation, going on in public and at once within ourselves. Richard Rorty (1979) has recently described philosophy as "a voice in a conversation" begun by Plato (p. 391).

Consider the atmospheres we might create if the growth of understanding is linked to the bringing into being of a common world. Consider what it would mean if students could be provoked to stand up against what is opaque and objectified, what is "really" and inalterably there. Consider what it would mean if they grasped the notion of incompleteness, the idea that there is always more to know and hear and see. (In *Moby Dick*, Ishmael says, "God keep me from ever completing anything." And, when he describes what he calls his "cetological System," he insists that it can never be perfected and that he must leave it "standing thus unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower. For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity.") Young people must become acquainted with the lower levels of the cathedral; they must claim them somehow as their habitation. At once, they must be enabled to develop a critical understanding of the heritage into

which they are moving and which, in dialogue with one another, they may be trying constantly to renew. To complete it, however, would be to cut short the life of the common world, to take no responsibility for what Arendt called its "earthly immortality." There is, after all, an ongoing cultural story, of which the individual stories are a part; the making of it began before we came into the world; and, if we cherish it, if we render it valuable, we will take responsibility for keeping it alive.

Again, responsibility derives in part from recognition; and I would summon up once more the image of distinctive persons engaging in the speech and action that may constitute that common world. Sartre (1953) wrote often of action being the meaning of freedom, of the projects by which human beings choose themselves, and surely this is related to the ways in which persons may come together to learn to learn. Indeed, learning itself may be thought of as speech and action, entailing the taking of initiatives, the projection of possibilities. When we think of diverse perspectives and personal stories, we cannot but think of new beginnings as individuals appear before one another to make sense, to interpret, to renew. From the vantage point of beginnings, all sorts of things are possible; no one can, with any certainty, predict the end. So it is with action as well; what follows from it can neither be predicted nor controlled.

I am quite aware that this is at odds with our present notions of what we do in schools, where behavior rather than action is the matter of concern. Behavior, unlike action, conforms to certain statistical laws. Considering it, we think in terms of tendencies, of probabilities; we aggregate; we compute, measure, and predict. We focus our attention on end points in our classrooms, on objectives. That, we insist, is what the so-called public seems to demand. We are compelled, we tell ourselves, to respond to expectations; and present expectations, according to all official and conventional wisdom, are for measurable achievement, not for risks and pro-

cess and open possibility. So we orient ourselves to outputs, to end points; we talk about how important it is to have a clear idea of outcomes if curricula are to be viable. Many of us find it unimaginable to take the risks of discovery learning, even to allow for multiple perspectives. "The Kingdom of Numbers is all boundaries," W. H. Auden said in one of his poems. We are accustomed to functioning within the boundaries, in the light of delimitations. Doing so, we feel ourselves to be benevolent and, yes, pragmatic; we are responding to need, enabling at least some of

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the young to meet market demand. It is no wonder that the matter of freedom is so seldom a matter of educational concern in times like these. Freedom interrupts determinisms and orderly cause and effect sequences, as choosing cuts across necessity. This can be unsettling for the empirical researcher and the measurement specialist, as uncertainty is unsettling in the sense that anything goes. It is conceivable, though, that such persons too may come to regard their own perspectives as provisional. They may come to recognize that there can be no single, dominating perspective if there is to be a public space. I am convinced that they, too, want to keep the common world alive, that they also see the need to renew.

Gerald Grant (1981), writing recently in *Daedalus*, effectually challenged the domination of a single perspective when he argued against the way we operate "our public schools as if they were factories for learning in which the only value is increased cognitive out-

put." As he sees it, education "by its very nature" must occur in a community and produce something the participants feel has value. His language is different, but it seems to me that he has in mind something resembling a public space. He believes, as I do, that it is not enough to emphasize efficiency and achievement, certainly not in impersonal and bureaucratic atmospheres; moral virtues, he thinks, as well as intellectual ones, should be taught. Then he made the important point that, if the schools continue as they are, more and more people may send their children to private schools, which do provide communities, limited though they may be. Others may select a contract-learning system in which skills are learned through individual contract. The remaining option is "to regenerate a dialogue about moral education in an increasingly technicist society." He went on:

We cannot return to a golden age that never was, nor can we put McGuffey's Readers back on the shelves. But we need to reinvent a modern equivalent for the McGuffey's Reader, a provisional morality that expresses some of the common beliefs of a democratic pluralist society—which means that, although we respect differences of opinions on many issues, there are some salient or core beliefs to which all subscribe. Pluralism is in fact not possible without agreement on some kinds of values: the minimal order required for dialogue, the willingness to listen to one another, respect for truth, the rejection of racism. . . . , as well as those transcendent values that shore up the whole society—a sense of altruism and service to others and respect for personal effort and hard work. Without such agreement, one does not have a public, but a kind of radical relativism; not pluralism but mere coexistence (pp. 147–148).

This way of putting it helps make clear the fact that the diverse perspectives that create the reality of the public space cannot include those that reject dialogue, encourage sexism or racism, insist on one-dimensional certainty. And the talk of "salient or core beliefs" surely relates to that which is "seen and heard by others as well

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as ourselves.” The idea of a plurality, like the idea of pluralism, allows for diverse and distinctive ways of seeing and hearing. It allows for the sounds and tones of voices seldom listened to, even today: the voices of women, immigrants, children, minorities, strangers of all kinds. But their being together in a public space is for the sake of coming in touch with the common, of making something audible and visible in between.

The “in-between” for Hannah Arendt is the root meaning of “interest,” and she wrote about the worldly interests that bind people together, objective realities like (in our case) research and grants and schooling and curriculum and sense making to which our words here and our deeds here refer. But she also said that this worldly in-between may be overlaid with another in-between, consisting of deeds and words and owing its origin to our acting and speaking directly to one another, in our own voices, from our own places in the world. “This second, subjective in-between is not tangible, since there are no tangible objects in which it could solidify; the process of acting and speaking can leave behind no such results and end products. But for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the ‘web’ of human relationships” (Arendt, 1958). If we can use what Camus’ Tarrou called “plain, clear-cut language,” if we can listen to one another and appear freely before one another, we also have the possibility of affirming and renewing the common world.

I do not believe that we can maintain public education in this country or restore its significance for persons if we do not concern ourselves in this way. I cannot imagine a coherent sense of purpose in education if something common does not arise in a public space. I am not thinking about organization or about some official framework in which educators must take their places. Nor am I talking about anything that is predictable, anything that is sure. I

want to see atmospheres created in which what my colleague, Freeman Butts, calls “civic learning” can be revived (Butts, 1980). I want to see imagination released and openings found for the arts, so that new languages can be explored and new perspectives opened, and so that young people will be enabled to look out beyond the actual and the given and summon into being alternative worlds. I want to see alienation and fixity give way to participation and movement, the free play of movement, the free play of thought, all for the sake of the common world.

And, yes, for the sake of life itself. Jonathan Schell (1982), writing on “The Fate of the Earth” in *The New Yorker*, describes the human world, in Hannah Arendt’s sense, as a common world distinguished from the private realm that belongs to each person individually. He says:

The creation of a common world is the use that we human beings, and we alone among earth’s creatures, have made of the biological circumstance that while each of us is mortal, our species is biologically immortal. If mankind had not established a common world, the species would still outlast its individual members and be immortal, but this immortality would be unknown to us and would go for nothing, as it does in the animal kingdom, and the generations, unaware of one another’s existence, would come and go like waves on the beach, leaving everything just as it was before. In fact, it is only because humanity has built up a common world that we can fear our destruction as a species. (p. 60)

It is this common world, he means, that is threatened by nuclear destruction, our human world, our future. We educate because we expect a future and have trust in it; we educate because we refuse to allow the generations simply to “come and go like waves on the beach, leaving everything just as it was before.” How can we focus on achievement only, in the face of holocaust, in the face of nothingness?

“We must learn to live in the world,” Robert Penn Warren once wrote, and the sentence hangs in

my memory. The only way to learn to live and to empower our children to learn to live is to choose as durable and precious a visible common world. Each of us, from his or her own specialty and vantage point, has a distinctive part to play. We have the power, here in our space of appearance. And our power will be significant if we speak with one another in our own authentic voices and disclose reality as we do so, if we act so as to establish what holds us together anew. We have the power because we are together in speech and action, and because possibility spreads before us, and because there are boundaries to break through.

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