

TEACHER AS HEALER

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The challenges of the classroom cast the therapist's role in a new light

"Education! Which of the various me's do you propose to educate, and which do you propose to suppress?... Who are you? How many selves have you? And which of those selves do you want to be?"

--D. H. Lawrence

The artist, the educator and the therapist walk different paths in different ways, but those paths meet at an intersection where the street sign says: *You must change your life*. For we do not go to the artist, the educator or the therapist to remain the same; we go to them to be given the vision and the tools to go on, and to go on is always to change.

As an artist, I was offered the challenge of teaching high school kids at a small private school; now as an artist and teacher, I've been asked to write about education for a readership of psychotherapists. Let's then make the link clear at the outset:

Therapy *is* teaching. It is many other things as well, but teaching is at its core. Whether any given client can be healed, no one can know in advance; but almost anyone can be taught, and with that knowledge, perhaps heal. The root question that faces the therapist in the consulting room may be put this way: What are clients doing that's causing their pain, and how can they *learn* not to do it? Even if their pain has been generated by circumstances beyond their control in their family and/or their society, their *relationship* to that pain is active, is a behavior, is something they're doing. Often the most difficult task of the psychotherapist is to teach this fundamental fact--which usually involves teaching clients a new vocabulary, a language through which to understand and deal with the dilemma, as well as increase their sense of possibility to include new modes of behavior. Thus the role of the therapist *as teacher* can't be exaggerated. Teaching and learning (two very different activities) may be the most jargon-free and judgment-free description of the therapist-client bond. Certainly the very presence of the client in the consulting room is a way of saying, "I must change my life, and you must teach me how."

High school kids facing a teacher make a statement by their presence that is not so very different: "My life *is* changing, drastically, and you must teach me something that can help my life change well, change productively, change richly."

Beyond this, the parallels between the consulting room and the classroom are often instructive. The schoolteacher does not, and should not, have permission to be a therapist--though sometimes individual students will seek out some teachers for something very like therapy. But today's high school kids are acutely aware that the world they are hopefully being equipped to enter is chaotic and dis-eased. With an intense and discordant adolescent mix of realism and idealism, they don't expect their education to heal the world, but they do demand--albeit indirectly and often

symptomatically; that is, through acting out--that they be inoculated against its dis-ease and, in that way, healed. A good education is a form of preventive medicine. It is a strengthener of one's mental, emotional and spiritual immune system. Healing, then, in this systemic sense, is part of a teacher's job--a fact that the vocabulary of education retains from its ancient roots: one earns a *doctorate* in literature and history and political science and economics and philosophy, etc., as well as in medicine. One becomes a doctor of knowledge. In that usage is the nuance that knowledge is a branch and form of medicine, a curative, a way of healing.

No matter what the subject of the class, most students want to know how their studies relate to that dis-eased world beyond the classroom. Often what they really mean by this is, how will their inner immune system be strengthened against the world's dis-ease? So they will bring that world into the classroom to test the teacher at every opportunity. An example: Carl, a talented and highly intelligent, redheaded 15-year-old deep into hip-hop, told me, "The world is just too massively fucked up. No one can change it." The challenge in his eyes said that he was quite aware of the hot potato he'd just lobbed into my hands. His very body language--sitting in a slouch that was all aggressive akimbo angles--told me that if I couldn't speak to this, then I couldn't speak to him about much. I said, "Changing the world is ... well, problematic. Maybe impossible. But changing what's going on in the room you're actually in--that's always possible. And it's not impossible to change what's happening on your street--though that's difficult; or in your city--though that's more difficult; or even in your country-- though that's incredibly difficult. But to change what's going on in any room you happen to be in, whatever and wherever that room happens to be--that isn't easy either, but it's *always* possible."

We started to talk about that; but now we were talking about the means of change, not the sulky impossibility of it. I wasn't trying to be a therapist; nevertheless, something in his vision had been healed of its dis-ease. (For that afternoon, anyway--in education as in psychotherapy, you never know what will stick.)

Or this exchange in a class on tragedy, studying Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* : Rosalinda, age 13--who was enjoying the discovery that she could be a naughty girl, but nevertheless was concentrating on good grades--told of a friend's older sister, an actress auditioning for silly roles in commercials. Rosalinda was contending that this actress "had to" take such roles. "No, she doesn't," I said. Rosalinda argued that the actress wouldn't "get ahead" if she didn't. I dropped a bomb: "You don't *have to* do anything in this life except die. Everything else is optional." There were a few moments of heavy, uneasy silence in the class. And then Dorothy, a tall, blond, thoughtful girl, looking down hard at her shoes, softly said, "That's true, isn't it?" As therapists know, sometimes one tries to heal by increasing the level of discomfort.

Remember that we were studying tragedy--which is to say, we were studying the possibilities and consequences of choice. Antigone put her uncle, King Creon, into a position in which he either had to back down politically or kill her; either way, he risked grave consequences, while she was courting death. The power of Antigone's choice was that, though she was not much older than Rosalinda and Dorothy, she chose to rush the inevitability of her death for the sake of her integrity. Suddenly, through Rosalinda's story

of her actress friend, the issues of Antigone were real and clear: Antigone would have agreed with me--integrity was more important than "getting ahead"; Creon would have agreed with Rosalinda's commercial actress--do what's expedient now for a future goal. Tragedy occurs when neither choice is necessarily wrong, but both choices are mutually destructive. As therapists know, clarity of itself can be a kind of healing, and what often needs most to be healed is a person's wounded or crippled capacity for choice. For a few moments in that class, it became real that the actions most people take for granted are actually choices. Education had occurred.

Notice that in both these examples, as happens over and over in the classroom, what I've come to call "the moment of education" manifests from the lesson, but isn't in the lesson-plan; it occurs when the student somehow challenges the material from his or her own experience, demanding a response from the teacher. In other words, like a client in the consulting room, the student is most ready to absorb learning when he or she brings up the issue unbidden. But the teacher, like the therapist, must try to create a structure in which such moments occur, and then be prepared to follow them to their conclusions.

Sometimes a kind of healing, and a kind of education, occurs when boundaries are pushed aside and/or redefined and there's more space for honest exchange to take place. In this school, boys aren't supposed to wear baseball caps in class, but it's pretty much left up to the discretion of the individual teacher. On the first day of a poetry class, Jake sat in the front row with his cap on, smiled and said, "Do you care about the hat?" "I care more about what's under it." General laughter. And mutual respect. *Every moral lesson is, in part, a lesson about boundaries.* I'd respected Jake's and at the same time let him know by my tone that I expected him to respect mine; and we'd mutually altered the boundaries set by the school. Moral choices had been made in a flash. I added, "I'm loose, but I'm demanding." We'd introduced each other: the class, through Jake, had announced itself to me and had forced a situation in which I'd announced myself to them. Now we'd have to see whether education could take place within these altered boundaries, and with the seemingly contradictory values of "loose" and "demanding" in dialectic with each other.

I went on: "This is poetry, not math or biology. In math or biology, you're usually either right or wrong. With poetry, there's usually no one right answer. So you might have an answer very different from mine, and still be right. Agreeing with me isn't the point of this class. The point is how deeply you engage the material, and whether you can back up what you say. Which, in case you haven't noticed yet, is also the point of life. Which is one reason we're studying poetry. Any questions?"

Someone asked the inevitable question almost always asked the first day of a high school class: "How are we going to be graded?"

"All I've got to go on is what you write and your presence in class--not necessarily whether you speak up or not, but the quality of your attention. Though if you don't speak up in class, you'd better put your effort into the writing or I won't understand your understanding. Just one thing: I don't expect a class to be silent and prim, but if you gab and interrupt while somebody is venturing an opinion--I'll flunk you cold."

Clarity and boundaries--flexible, permeable boundaries--are necessities if education is to go deep. And the boundaries are determined in part by the subject. If the class is poetry, poetry should cue what form the life of the classroom takes. Thus poetry is "in the air," and they get something of the subject just by being there. Which is what I hoped to achieve by "loose, but demanding." What I was trying to heal, so to speak, was the damage done to the subject itself (poetry) by the usual rigidity of classroom structure. My authority and expectations had to be real and clear; but if their freedom wasn't equally real and clear, then to speak to them of poetry was a lie.

Something classroom teaching and therapy have in common is how much education and/or healing is determined and permitted by the atmosphere of the room. Though this is a private school of mostly affluent and highly intelligent kids, discipline can be a problem. These are kids who often feel a ridiculous sense of entitlement, and many are spoiled silly, but their pain and fear are just as real as kids' anywhere; and, like kids everywhere, they act it out. Some teachers had terrible discipline problems, literally, unable sometimes to get the class to shut up for the whole period. My classes knew I wasn't kidding: I absolutely wouldn't tolerate that. At the same time, I was more lax about other modes of behavior--hats, for instance, or neatness of homework--than some other teachers. With other subjects, this may not have been appropriate, but I felt that when the subject is self-expression, then a certain quirkiness has to be tolerated or the medium will undermine the message. Of course, I couldn't let that go too far. There has to be enough cohesion of style from class to class and teacher to teacher to keep the school manageable, but enough difference between them so that each class is a unique environment that demands a certain amount of mature adjustment. When this is done consciously--that is, when teachers respect one another's styles and limits--the very differences between the teachers becomes an education tool.

The paradox of teaching great poetry in high school is that great poetry is written neither by nor for children. Great poetry is written by exceptional adults during transformative states of mind, and is rarely wholly understandable even to equally gifted adults--even, for that matter, to the poets themselves. A solution often opted for is to have the students read a lot of criticism and then remasticate those opinions, letting them think that if they understand the critics, they understand the poems. I find this tactic gruesome and traitorous--a betrayal of poet, poem and child in the name of an artificially concocted coherence that often passes for "knowledge." Another option is very much harder to test--to "get it all over you," in the phrase of jazz singer Etta James. By which I mean: the point is not to understand the poem at this stage of their lives--if, indeed, anyone ever can, because most poets aren't aiming for linear understanding in their readers. The point is to expose yourself to the poem as the poem is exposing itself to you, to *experience* the poem, experience that meeting-place between the reader and the poem, and understand *that* --for it's always within the range of students to have some understanding of their own experience. I call this "engaging the material." Any literate student can read a poem; it takes something more from within--and the guidance of a teacher--to engage the poem.

I presented them with the best poetry I knew, getting them in way over their heads and letting them know that was okay because that's where great poetry always takes you, over your head--that's often how you know you're in the right place at the right time, as

far as poetry is concerned. And I began with Rainer Maria Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo." I gave them two translations: C.F. MacIntyre's and Robert Bly's. Using very different words, both translations followed Rilke's thick, opaque, yet brightly lit description of the ancient, broken statue . . . until the last words, which were identical in both translations: *You must change your life*. Few understand the bulk of the poem at first reading; anyone can understand its last five words. It's the brilliance, the shock, of the poem: though you can't "understand" the statue, it suddenly speaks to you--and speaks an accessible and inescapable statement. The question hangs in the air, and did for the class: Why, and by what right, is the statue talking to *you* like that?

Which begs another question: Why does art exist at all? In part, at least, art exists because "normal" daily life isn't enough for anybody, and never has been. The student--like the client in the consulting room--isn't wrong, isn't a freak, to be frustrated with the limits of daily life. Everything humanity is proud of, and many of the things it has good reason to be ashamed of, come from testing and breaking those limits. Something in the world--something that human beings both express and shape and store in art--is constantly communicating to us that there's something "more," and doesn't merely invite us to change, but tells us that we must. That's the starting place, the central point of art's spiritual geography: that at any moment you can step out of the state you're in into something more intense, even exalted. In this sense poetry, both the writing and the study of it, is a preventive medicine against the incredibly debilitating dis-ease of the idealization of the "normal"--that is, poetry is teaching that it is normal for the "normal" to be fragile, to break apart at any moment into one or more of its many paradoxical elements. Poetry teaches you always to be on the lookout for the extraordinary in the so-called normal--a healing knowledge.

I tried to make these issues clear in class, all the while uncertain that I was doing these kids any favors. As an artist--which is say, as someone reckless by nature--was I only communicating my own recklessness toward the normal to people who might very well not be prepared to take on such a vision? Was I educating them or infecting them? The resistance of some students to the poems was clearly a resistance to these dangers and challenges of art--the dangers inherent in, and most valued by, art. If that, in fact, was why some were pulling back from the material, was it fair to grade them down for that? If that was their experience, they had a right to it. So "loose, but demanding" was double-edged. I could grade them down for, say, not doing their homework, but I didn't have the right to grade them down for rejecting the implications inherent in poetry, or for rejecting poetry as an endeavor, as something that might have anything to do with them, and rejecting it flat. Education in a subject doesn't necessarily consist of learning it, it can also exist in rejecting it; the very inner immune system I'm trying to strengthen in the student may be precisely what, in that student, is rejecting the poetry--because for some students poetry marks a dangerous area where their instincts warn them not to tread. If I think less of them for that, then I'm not accepting the education that's really going on in them.

When I presented a poem to them, I gave the birth- and death-dates of the poets in parenthesis next to the poet's name. It didn't take them long to observe that many of these poets had died relatively young. When they questioned what the poet had died of, all too often it was suicide or substance abuse or political persecution; often, as in the case of

Rilke, poets seemed to die simply of their own intensity. Yet clearly, I thought these poets exceptional human beings. So what message was I really communicating?

I was inviting them to inner lives that sometimes entail real risk. In addition, I was putting enormous value on the risk. To study poetry as an academic subject is safe; to experience poetry is not. I was nevertheless inviting them to that experience. So in one sense I wasn't there to make life easier for them, but more complicated and more difficult.

And here there is a clear parallel with therapy: the confines of the client's pain may be ultimately easier to live with--in the sense that its choices are simpler--than the liberation offered by self-knowledge. No less a figure than Carl Jung said that the most frightening thing in the world may be to know oneself. Some students relished the challenging risks of poetry and "got it all over them" and received high grades; but others just did the basic work, while holding the material at arm's length, and didn't that choice deserve to be honored as well? Still others just plain weren't ready for it--an accident of birth, a number on the calendar, had placed them in a situation, a class, that their inner lives weren't prepared for, either to engage or reject.

Sometimes the world crashes into the classroom with unavoidable force, and it becomes the teacher's task to mediate the impact between the world and the students. The curriculum suddenly becomes the survival of the spirit at a gruesome moment in history. It was December, 1998, and I was teaching poetry to a 10th-grade class. The night before, the United States had bombed Iraq again.

These kids were born circa 1983. They were 6 or 7 when the Soviet empire fell, and remembered next to nothing of it. They were 8 during the Gulf War, and remembered it as little more than a frantic blur on their TV screens. Now they were 15, soon to turn 16--plenty old enough to know that our bombs were falling on human beings. They knew that civilians would certainly be killed. Many of the boys knew the intricate details of the weaponry involved. This was the first act of war that these young people would remember. This was their first morning of war.

I wonder if, as jaded adults, we can really appreciate that fact anymore--for we have had to deaden ourselves to so much horror. But there was nothing deadened about these children. Awareness of the irrational carnage inherent in the word "war" was a physical blow to them. They were restless, jittery, angry, excited and collectively in a state of shock. Our class was the first of the day; it began at 8:00 a.m. Many of them had been up into the wee hours following the CNN broadcasts, and had gotten only three or four hours' sleep. Walking into my classroom was their first task on their first morning of war, and they brought the war in with them. Some asked openly: What did poetry have to do with bombs?

I had to base my answer on what I'd been teaching, and, in fact, my answer would test the worth of what I'd taught, and we all knew it. So I had to go to the heart of what I'd taught.

To teach poetry you must teach silence. For silence is the ground of poetry. A poem comes out of silence and, when it finishes, it has created a richer silence. So I'd experimented with silence. Sometimes we'd just listen to a silence. I say "a" silence because there are many kinds. In a particular silence there would be sounds of the air conditioner or the heater; sounds of wind and birds, traffic and airplanes and rain; sounds of younger children playing outside and sounds of other classes through the walls. So I'd taught that silence isn't the absence of sound; silence is a quality of stillness and expectancy and richness that can be heard as a ground-note beneath all sound. I'd told them that they could be on an isolated hilltop or at a rock concert, in the middle of a family fight or walking alone on a beach, and if, anywhere, anytime, they listened for the silence, they could eventually learn to find it and hear it--for it is always there. I'd taught a poem of the 15th-century Zen master Ikkyu, translated by Stephen Berg:

*you can hear it when it doesn't even move
you can hear it when the wind forces itself through rocks*

I'd told them that if they could learn to hear the silence, it would give them a kind of freedom that isn't in any Constitution--and that this is the freedom poets know. At first, most of them thought I was nuts. Then, every once in a while, someone would say something especially cogent, or someone would read one of the poems, and there would be a stillness in the class, a pause, and I would sometimes hear a kid say quietly, "That was a good silence." They were getting it.

So on their first morning of war, I asked for silence and they knew what I meant. It was a good silence--full, sad, fearful, expectant and more than usually collective, that is, shared. You didn't have the sense of people retreating into themselves. You had the sense of most of them seeking out each other--for comfort. Then they started asking questions about the war, and we filled each other in about what facts we knew. I was outwardly calm, but inwardly torn apart. It wasn't that I was against this particular act of war--though I was. It was that their relative innocence made real to me, as nothing else ever quite had, the horrible and seemingly ineradicable human fact of war. Once again, as they had for generation upon generation, adults had failed to deliver a world to its children free of mass irrational carnage. I had to speak, and this, more or less, is what I said:

"The first war I remember being aware of was the Hungarian Revolution, when I was 11 or 12 ... and then, let's see, the Cuban Revolution, the Cuban Missile Crisis ... then Vietnam, which seemed to go on forever ... the Arab-Israeli wars ... and war after war after war since.... As you grow older, the initial shock of war fades. You imagine that you get used to it ... you harden yourself, you close off your capacity for empathy without even knowing you're doing it ... you try to strike a balance between feeling and callousness.... You tell yourself that this is how the world is, you tell yourself a lot of things, you get older and, consciously or unconsciously, you try not to think too much about it... until one bright morning, you have to look into the eyes of the young and talk to them about *their* first war ..." and now, in spite of myself, my voice choked and my eyes teared ..."and *that*, that is hard as Hell."

I couldn't go on. And there was quite a silence. We were sharing our helplessness before the human monstrosity of war, and we were sharing our feelings for one another and for those who were suffering. There was nothing we could do. Absolutely and utterly nothing. And there was no glossing over that. All we could do was be with one another in the most human way we were capable of. And we did that. And I was very proud of them for it.

And then I brought them back to a poem we'd studied weeks earlier, written by Anna Akhmatova during the horrors that followed the Russian Revolution, as translated by Stanley Kunitz and Max Hayward. It begins, "Everything's plundered, betrayed...." and ends:

*And the miraculous comes so close
to the ruined, dirty houses --
something not known to anyone at all,
but wild in our breasts for centuries.*

I said, "That poem was written for exactly this moment--for exactly all the moments like this that Anna Akhmatova knew would happen. It was written for you. *That's* the deal, baby. It's written for *you* ."

And that's all that I had ever tried to teach them, really: That poetry wasn't something "out there," a subject to be learned. You read it because it's *yours*. It's meant for you. And something not known to anyone is wild in *your* breast. It's here to tell you what you want most to forget: You must change your life.

"I don't give a damn whether or not you go to college. I care that you know that this stuff is yours. And I care that you treat it and care for it and pass it on as though it's yours. Because it is."

Education is preventive medicine. Education is an inoculation against the virus of cultural chaos. Education is healing. Education is the strengthening of the recuperative powers of the psyche. And it's rife with uncertainty. And it's never complete. And on a lot of people, including "A" students, it's just plain wasted--we continually classify automatons with good vocabularies as "intelligent," when all they'll ever do is go along. But well-educated people accept the human heritage as their personal responsibility, and they go on from there--unpredictably.

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