

Pointing a Finger at the Moon

Reflections on teaching photography as a profession

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This anthology marks the end of my career as a full time teacher in an academic institution. For 25 years I have been engaged daily in the traffic and transmission of information and, dare I say it, inspiration. I have always enjoyed this interaction with individual students but, as time progressed and periods of reflection on the meaning-of-it-all became more accessible, I have to confess that increasingly I seemed to be questioning, doubting my chosen profession, as if something, somewhere had gone slightly out of kilter but I could not quite put my finger on the problem.

A psychologist friend had no doubts about the cause: Typical, he said. We all experience these questions of value and feelings of frustration whenever we approach the end of a major commitment. Don't worry, or do anything rash, he advised, It will soon pass.

I was never sure that I wanted it to pass. The doubt was a stimulus to a closer examination of the issues involved. I held onto the hope that one day there would be an enlightenment, a eureka flash of insight, which would explain all things and transform me into The Ideal Teacher.

The hoped for epiphany never occurred. And I still have no solutions. But perhaps these notes will comfort those still in the teaching profession or provide some warnings to those who are contemplating a life in academia.

The crux of the matter is that I love teaching and hate education, for the same reasons that I can revere the Jesus of the New Testament but have no faith in the dogma of organized religions, or that I can be fascinated by politics but scorn politicians and political parties. As soon as ideas become institutionalized they lose their breathtaking ability to radically change lives and become mere tenets of a superficial belief system.

This is the Information Age and we are led by the nose, by the mass media, to respect the fact due to its capitalized initial letters. But information is not knowledge and knowledge is not wisdom. I would happily trade all the information in all the memory banks of every computer in the world for just one important idea.

Yet teachers, by definition, collect, collate and disseminate information, although they glamorize it a bit by calling it research. I am skeptical that all this university research

adds up to anything of value to the world, and especially to the student. Any information that can be transmitted by word of mouth by one person to another is relatively useless, and has little or no effect on the student's life. This is especially true when we ask for facts to be regurgitated at examination time. What we test is short-term memory, not understanding. And what of "facts"? One of the greatest myths of education is that facts equal Truth. In my own life, however, I am increasingly aware that unarticulated impressions, just out of reach possibilities, hunches, suppositions, and superstitions, myths themselves and sometimes downright untruths all hold keys to the unlocking of Truth.

I have to admit it: I am only interested in changing lives, not providing information for its own sake. It sounds impertinent and I make the statement with some embarrassment. I do not know why such admissions are awkward but they are, like conducting to virtue, or advocating Beauty and Goodness, or even Truth, or urging on the artist as spiritual seeker. Such notions, nowadays, tend to prompt the gagging reflex. But I cannot imagine the purpose of education if such concepts are not at issue. And centrally so. This is true no matter what the field of study, but particularly crucial in the arts, where the medium is, or should be, merely the tool for prying apart the barriers which separate the individual from a more meaningful relationship with reality.

Expertise in a field of knowledge becomes, therefore, the starting point for a more charged existence. And it is this that is the purpose of education. But I have no idea how this can be systematized, institutionalized, or legitimized, let alone taught or tested for a grade.

In my own experience, the only learning which has been meaningful has been self-motivated, self-taught, self-appropriated, self-discovered. As the old saying goes, "When the student is ready, the master will appear." We have to be pre-sensitized to accept an experience before it can be impressed and fixed into consciousness. So there is a danger in even attempting to speak of these more crucial aspects of education to students who are "unprepared," in that the words can be mimicked but the truth of the experience remains unappropriated. Worse still, the words might, forever after, act as a barrier against the experience itself. I feel guilty when I try to speak, out of caring enthusiasm, about these matters, and I later hear echoes of the words alone in the students' responses, and I know through feeling that the words are empty, unknown, for that student, at that time. Truth and values rise up from within and are self-nurtured. Education, all too often, transplants them into soil not yet prepared and they wither. The student begins to distrust the experience and significant learning is stifled.

For these reasons, when I look back over my career in teaching, the known results are negligible. Now and again a student (usually one revisiting the university several years after graduation) will give me hope that all is not lost. But these were occasional conjunctions of two lives which, by chance, happened to meet in a classroom. They were not situations which I could have predicted or prepared for.

Primarily, then, teaching provides an opportunity for me to learn. I am testing my own weaknesses out loud and listening to hear if my responses sound valid. Yes, the students are being used in my selfish quest for meaning. I have thrown a pulley around the educational process and winch myself forward, by increments, towards an end result swathed in uncertainties but which, hopefully, means that I am becoming what I am potentially.

My own needs are satisfied. How can the needs of the student be better served? I wish I knew. All I do know is that the biggest single factor inhibiting education is the educational system. The problem is that as soon as alternatives are suggested, these alternatives become ossified into a different, but equally rigid, system – and I am well aware that criticism alone is not very constructive. Ideally, I would eliminate all examinations, the credit system, grades, and the declaration of majors. I would even dispense with degrees. The university would be a wide-open resource where the student, in consultation and with advice from a faculty advisor, would select courses, or single lectures, which might seem most appropriate for that individual alone. Even the courses could be infinitely variable – some would be a series of three lectures, others might require several weeks of eight-hour days, and so on. Without a credit system this would not pose any logistical problems. It is patently absurd that every subject or field can be parceled into discreet three-hour slots over 15 weeks. This is an administrative convenience and nothing more.

We must find methods by which the student's life search becomes the *raison d'être* of the educational system rather than the student being a product on the conveyor belt of a degree factory. It is a major mistake for universities to assume that the student is unaware of this fact.

All natural entities have a drive towards complexity. This is a basic evolutionary urge. All human beings have a natural urge to grow, learn and raise consciousness. Unfortunately, this life imperative is stalled by the educational process.

This evolutionary drive is accelerated when the student is awakened, alert and active in the learning process. The student then becomes responsible for his/her own education, not a passive swallower of undigested facts. All too often education takes a palpable, vibrant, relevant subject, sucks out its life-juices and kicks around the dead, dusty carcass under the notion that academic is synonymous with useless.

Education must be made more "relevant" – not in the 60s liberal notion of providing useful social skills, but relevant to the broader, deeper issues which are at the heart of an individual's quest for learning. Any and every subject is appropriate and relevant when expertise is no longer imagined to be the goal of education, but the entrance door through which new insights can be gained by recognizing the interconnectedness of all things, like islands washed by the same tides and arising from the same sea bed.

Learning then moves away from the acquisition of information toward experiences integrated with the whole of life.

The teacher points toward the moon. The student must first learn to look at the moon, not at the finger.

The responsibility rests with the teacher. Most educators, of my experience, might be experts in a field of academic inquiry but do not understand, or acknowledge, the further reaches of learning; they are content to waggle their finger and ignore the moon. I am talking about myself. I might feel that there is more to offer the student than biographies, concepts, processes and historical data, but what can I say which will make the moon more vivid and real? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps my major responsibility is to live out my own life in front of the students. Perhaps in my own enthusiasms and in the application of my field to my life, some of my values will be absorbed through a mysterious osmotic process. This should not be a didactic force-feeding of personal values but an implicit assumption that life-relevancy is suffused within everything, no matter how obscure, obtuse and seemingly peripheral the course subject matter.

The contradiction implicit in this notion is that I also believe that the teacher's greatest gift to the student is as a resource to be used, not an authority to be obeyed. The teacher should be a repository of alternatives – directions, attitudes, ideologies and so on – irrespective of the teacher's own experiences, decisions, judgements and belief systems.

Then again, it is because of such contradictions that I have written these words, not as answers but as questions. Perhaps it is the contradictions themselves which hold meaning. Perhaps assurance, the certainty of rightness, is the cul-de-sac of progress. It occurs to me that a fogged and developed sheet of photographic paper would be totally black, and without meaning. Conversely, a virgin sheet of paper, developed straight from the box, would be totally white, and without meaning. Meaning, in a photograph, depends on a wide range of grays and includes the opposites of white and black. Perhaps that is a good analogy of Truth.

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