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Book Review of To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher

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REVIEW: WILLIAM AYERS' *TO TEACH: THE JOURNEY OF A TEACHER*

by

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I first became acquainted with William Ayers' writing in his article, "Thinking About Teachers and the Curriculum" (1986). In this he compared Ana, a midwife, whose philosophy was, "My skills and experiences can help you have the birth you want to have. The things I know can empower you." to good teachers who empower learners, make themselves available, and do not "confuse the central purpose or the major actors" of their professions. Both "are part of an ancient profession, one that is currently undervalued and misrepresented in society." I found this metaphor of teachers as midwives, with their experience, skills, and sensitivities, empowering students to learn and in turn being personally renewed themselves, so valuable that I shared the article with every graduate class in education which I taught.

In his new book, *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher*, William Ayers again has created a vision of the "spectacularly unlimited," "vital and honorable" profession teaching might be. It is a clear and direct answer to such works as *A Nation at Risk* (1983) which speak of the educational foundations of our society "being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity." The risk is detailed by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in terms of SAT scores, standardized achievement tests, and the need for more skilled workers as these are defined by business and military leaders. Nowhere among the statistics and rhetoric are noted the social and economic conditions of families, schools, and communities that affect American students and teachers. Nowhere provided is a vision of "the challenge for teachers who are building an education based on experience to create opportunities for students to have the kind of experiences that will enable them to grow and develop into further experiences, and eventually to take control of their own learning" (Ayers, 1993). Popular for school improvement are recommendations for rigorous examinations, mandated courses, more selective admissions in teacher training institutions, more difficult subject matter texts, stiffer grades, more hours of homework, a longer school year, and "higher educational standards" for both teachers and students. In the schools William Ayers describes "we are saving one another and, perhaps with enough faith in people, saving the future."

William Ayers has written with vision, providing a humanistic and eloquent view of schooling and learning that illuminates Henry Giroux's philosophy (Giroux, 1984). Giroux sees the "new public philosophy with its celebration of economic and technocratic reason" failing to "provide a vision that takes seriously the kind of thoughtful participation in sociopolitical life that is expected from citizens in a democratic society."

These two positions represent essentially two very different world views. On one hand we have social thinkers and educational philosophers who, in part, see education as an objective and scientific means of meeting industrial needs and contributing to economic productivity. They are represented by the Carnegie Forum's Task Force on Teaching as a Profession's report, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*, which stated, "As in past economic and social crises, Americans turn to education. They rightly demand an improved supply [sic] of young people with the knowledge, the spirit, the stamina and the skills to make the nation once again fully competitive" (1986, p. 2). Others are committed to "cultural transmission ideology ... rooted in the classical academic tradition of Western education" (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972). They believe that the basic task of education is the transmission to the current generation of bodies of information and of rules and values collected in the past. As Kohlberg and Mayer point out, "these approaches

assume that knowledge and values–first located in the culture–are afterwards internalized by children through the imitation of adult behavior models, or through explicit instruction and reward and punishment" (1972). Talcott Parsons (1959), in his analysis of the school class and American society, saw American education's primary function as the selection of children, based on perceived skills and values, for allocation to future occupational status, and for socializing those children in the belief that their allocated role in a hierarchical society is natural and just. Thus, Parsons provides the utilitarian basis for viewing education as filling the empty vessels of students' minds with knowledge, skills, and prescribed attitudes and behaviors.

The other world view of education is exemplified by John Dewey. Giroux builds on Dewey's belief that education's mission is to stimulate children's development in power, intelligence, and democratic citizenship through interactions with the demands and problems of real social situations. Giroux sees schools as "democratic public spheres ... dedicated to forms of self and social empowerment ... [with] both teachers and students ... educated to struggle against forms of oppression in the wider society ... [with] teachers and administrators ... as transformative intellectuals who develop counterhegemonic pedagogies that not only empower students by giving them knowledge and social skills they will need to be able to function in the larger society as critical agents, but also to educate them for transformative action" (Giroux, 1988, p. xxxiii). Ayers, with Dewey, Giroux, Shor, and McLaren, also sees teachers as "liberating educators." These writers all share with Paulo Freire (1970) the vision that education can "de-condition" people and help them to become more than the givens of their lives would seem to dictate; that education "is either for domestication or for freedom."

Ayers begins *To Teach* with a chapter on "The Challenge of Teaching." He writes of injustices and deficiencies in society in "desperate need of repair," but sees classrooms as "places of possibility and transformation for youngsters, certainly, but also for teachers. Teaching can still be world changing work." He focuses on young people who need a "thoughtful, caring adult in their lives, someone who can nurture and challenge them, coach and guide, understand and care about them." Where Giroux emphasizes struggling for change, fighting against oppression, focusing on suffering and the "reality of those treated as 'the other' " (Giroux, 1988, p. xxxiii), Ayers strives for the same ends through the celebration of "the ecstasy of intimacy," "an ethic of caring," "a challenge ... to decide what you care about and what you value ..." He is particularly concerned with values in a time when education seems to be "narrowing its agenda to issues of efficiency and control." Ayers writes, "... if we are ever to really understand ourselves, our situation, and our options, and if we are to undertake meaningful action toward improvement in schools or in society," we must face problems that are not essentially technical or material but are, at their heart, moral problems.

In his second chapter, "Seeing the Student," he enlarges on a theme which he shares with Humanistic psychologist, Carl Rogers, that "teaching is primarily a matter of love." He states that "sustained interest in and deep knowledge of another person is in itself an act of love, and a good preparation for teaching." Starting with the premise that "teaching is an interactive practice that begins and ends with seeing the student," he rejects the widespread notion that seeing students means categorizing and labeling them. In what Ayers considers the "human-centered act of teaching," seeing must be searching for the answer to the question, "Who is this person before me?" That means not focusing on all the things an individual cannot do well or doesn't care about, but on that person's interests, ways of self expression, awareness of self as a learner, efforts, potential, and "areas of wonder." What we need are insights or clues into how to engage the individual in a "journey of learning." In this he builds on his concept of "teaching as a moral act" or as an "intellectual challenge" and urges us to break with the "deficit driven model of teaching as uncovering perceived deficiencies and constructing micro-units for repair."

In a later chapter of *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher*, "Keeping Track," Ayers views evaluation as part of "seeing the student." He discusses evaluation from "an assumption that all youngsters are struggling to make sense of the world [which] helps us to remember that all children are in some way productive and valuable, that they are all (given everything) doing the best they can, and that they are all themselves potentially people of values." Ayers wants to understand what Kieran Egan calls "bonnes a penser" (Goldman & Gardner, 1989), the forms of thought through which individuals make sense of their world and the particular strategies they use in their cultures. Egan urges us to see children "in many dimensions at once: intellectual, cultural, physical, spiritual, emotional." Similarly, Ayers says that in all assessment, "we are in pursuit of the child's pathways to knowledge and power," and seeing children in all their aspects is basic to teaching. If we can follow Ayers' routes to seeing children, as well as assessing them in both Howard Gardner's (1988, p. 50) and Egan's terms, we will be able to see beyond the stereotypes, prejudices, and unstated assumptions which undergird many schools.

We can read Ayers' book in terms of a philosophy which serves larger social goals and values through seeing students as individuals like ourselves, but unique in important ways. Given this framework, other chapters provide answers to his questions: "What knowledge and experiences are most worthwhile?" and "What are the means to strengthen, invigorate, and enable each person to take full advantage of those worthwhile experiences and that valuable knowledge?" This leads him directly to write about creating environments for learning which are reflections of a teacher's values and then to developing a curriculum.

In these chapters, Ayers provides both theory and illuminating examples. He speaks of space as "a visible container of human action, at times oppressive or liberating; beautiful or ugly" and he describes how to change our teaching spaces to become places that reflect what we know and value. He gives examples of spaces that are "laboratories for discovery and surprise," that are invitations to make choices for actions that result in learning. Ayers is clear that while challenging youngsters to pursue their interests and be active and experimental a teacher will more fully address curricular mandates and guidelines. He wants to demonstrate to children that they are capable of making knowledge their own, that it is "not some fixed entity locked in textbooks" and that "learning can be exciting, potentially awesome and deeply satisfying."

I was particularly struck by his statement that "teaching is often bridge-building; beginning on one shore with the knowledge, experience, know-how, and interests of the student, the teacher moves toward broader horizons and deeper ways of knowing." His depiction of the creation of a classroom "coming of age ceremony" for young adolescents exemplifies a way to build a base of knowledge about students and a bridge for those students to reading, literature, poetry, social science research, and the arts. His teaching/learning variations on the theme of "ME" range from early grades to middle school. They also provide a vital way of bringing multiculturalism to schools–a way that far transcends our traditional practices of celebrating "random holidays" and bringing "haphazard artifacts" into the classroom. These cultural bridges allow children to "love, respect, cherish, and retain" the deep wellsprings of meaning they bring to school. In real intercultural teaching, these meanings connect the teacher, the child, the school, and the parents–and all these members of the child's world learn from each other.

From this process of building bridges, the curriculum develops. Ayers is a realist about the conditions in schools in which teachers strive to build curriculum that "opens all children to the possibility of a life lived with courage, hope, and love." He seeks, as did Neil Postman in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1979), to "find ways to teach in an alternative way, perhaps as an act of resistance." In doing this, the teacher becomes empowered to move beyond teacher-proof curricula

and mandated texts and lesson plans to realize that "knowledge, thought, judgment, and wisdom" are not "the specific property of some expert, policy maker, or scholar who has predetermined and packaged it for easy consumption." Instead, Ayers conceives of a curriculum around a critical examination of the curriculum, involving both children and teachers. They find ways to draw on the full range of their resources, intelligence, skills, and experiences to improve mandated guidelines. He describes the process of an entire school community creating curricular themes which widen in "overlapping circles of knowledge, experience, and need" and which integrate otherwise fragmented subject matter into a core study. Ayers shows how children can become proficient in what we consider "basic skills" while seeing the connectedness in learning.

As a former reading specialist, I applauded Ayers' de-mythologizing the teaching of reading. His is a child-centered, common sense approach, based on the concept that "with few exceptions all children can learn to read. Some seem to learn easily and effortlessly–others struggle with reading." But the focus on reading problems and difficulties, and the "academic debates swirling around reading" have blinded us to the reality that children learn at different rates, in different ways, and at different times, and that there is no particular virtue in learning easily and early. Ayers speaks for a variety of teaching techniques in a literate environment with children having "opportunities to read, something to read for, [and] an audience for their reading, writing, and speaking." There is so much wisdom in these chapters that to write about the specific approaches that Ayers describes could not do him justice.

To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher is a wonderful book! It is inspirational in ways that remind me of Herbert Kohl's *Growing Minds* or Jonathan Kozol's *The Night is Dark and I Am Far From Home*. It communicates to the reader a sense of what life in classrooms is like and might become as in Tracy Kidder's *Among Schoolchildren* or Samuel Freedman's *Small Victories*. It provides examples of classroom practice that are creative, practical, and firmly rooted in a philosophy that opens up a vision of teaching which will enrich all of our lives. His writing is eloquent, humane, and very human. I've recommended that all of our student teachers read this book during their practicum. For those of us who have been in the field of education for many years, it is simply ecstatic.

If this review sounds like adolescent gushing, that is most certainly not my usual style. I do admit to a modicum of nostalgia for the optimism and romanticism of the 60s. If William Ayers' book has a flavor of those times, so be it. I believe that it is our challenge to create a society and schools in which his "romantic" vision could become a reality.

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