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Introduction

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Introduction

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Born in 1933, Vito Perrone was raised near Lansing, Michigan, and attended Michigan State University for all of his higher education. After a few years teaching secondary school, he became Dean of Common Learning and Graduate Studies at Northern Michigan University on Michigan's Northern Peninsula. In 1968, he was appointed Professor of history, education, and peace studies and Dean of the New School of Behavioral Studies in Education at the University of North Dakota; he became Dean of the Center for Teaching and Learning four years later. He left North Dakota in 1986 to become Vice President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Two years later he joined the faculty of the Harvard Graduate School of Education as Director of Teacher Education and chair of the Department of Teaching, Curriculum, and Learning Environments, while retaining a position as Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Foundation.

As Jay Featherstone reminds us in "The Organizer: Some Thoughts for a Future Historian" in this issue, Vito's work at North Dakota gained him national recognition both for his innovative ideas and for his broad vision and ability "as a great organizer in a rich U.S. tradition" to inspire and lead an educational community. The bold exchange program he initiated that allowed practicing teachers holding only a Normal School diploma (a majority in North Dakota in 1968) to complete their college education at the University of North Dakota while UND graduate students spent an internship year in their classrooms is admired for its simplicity as well as for the political coup it represents. It was a great act of faith on both sides to allow this interchange of personnel from different cultures. Undoubtedly, Vito drew on his extensive knowledge of the history of education to accomplish this collaboration. A few years ago, he described the typical current "separateness" between public schools and universities as an educational "scandal" (Perrone, 1994).

Drawing parallels between Vito's life and work and that of Leonard Covello, the "legendary" New York principal so lovingly described in Vito's own book, *Teacher With a Heart*, Featherstone goes on to describe the "big themes" of Vito's work: an emphasis on practice as well as theory; the connections among education levels from elementary school through teacher professional development; and the power of conversation, community, and personal relationships.

In "Vito Perrone and the Struggle for Democratic Schools," Patricia Carini provides us with her recollections on the origins and continuing work of the North Dakota Study Group (NDSG) and an intimate look at life at the New School from her perspective as a participant in the first "charter" meeting of the NDSG, as a visiting professor at UND, and as a major contributor to progressive education theory and practice for several decades. Archives from the Prospect School in Vermont, founded and directed by Patricia Carini, are now housed at UND. She reminds us of Vito's "unshakeable confidence that people of good will can work through differences and that change, even painful change, can be supported."

That quotation calls to mind John Dewey's statement of his faith in democracy in the address he contributed to a dinner in his honor on the occasion of his 80th birthday just after the beginning of World War II.

Democracy is a way of personal life controlled not merely by faith in human nature in general but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished. ... I did not invent this faith. I acquired it from my surroundings as far as those surroundings were animated by the democratic spirit. For what is the faith of democracy in the role of consultation, of conference, of persuasion, of discussion, in formation of public opinion, which in the long run is self-corrective, except faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man to respond with common sense to the free play of facts and ideas which are secured by effective guarantees of free inquiry, free assembly and free communication? (Dewey, 1939)

Vito's style and approach to education reflect a similar belief in the power of community and discourse. And his own demeanor and accepting attitude towards others has shaped his surroundings (as I suspect it did for Dewey) so they are repeatedly "animated by the democratic spirit."

Kathe Jervis states that her professional life was profoundly influenced by her exposure to Vito's values. In "Large Purposes in the Classroom: Doing Tai Chi Together," she discusses these values through a classroom story that illustrates how children and adults can grow and learn in a progressive classroom, where individuals can follow their deep interests under the guidance of a remarkable teacher. Both Ms. Jervis and Diane Mullins, the classroom teacher she describes, are members of NDSG, and the classroom atmosphere and events she describes mirror the kind of practices advocated by its members.

Finally, in "Trusting the Possibilities: Giving Voice to Vito's Ideas," Cecelia Traugh challenges the notion that standardization in education is advantageous and discusses teachers' professional development with an example from her own work, "rooted in the values and ideas Vito articulated and lives ... helping teachers maintain their sights on the necessary complexities of their work with children ... and [helping them] resist aspects of 'outside intrusion' they believe erode achievement of their educational purposes." She, too, refers to Vito's book, *Teacher With a Heart*.

The common themes found in these papers are no accident. They reflect both the influence of the intense commitment of Vito Perrone's life and life work as well as the common threads among the authors. All (including this writer) are long-term members of the North Dakota Study Group, that "quintessential small working conference" sustained both by the overlapping professional interests and personal connections of its members and Vito's steady, sustaining leadership.

Teacher With a Heart beautifully illustrates Vito's own approach to scholarship, education, and life. In his long introduction to excerpts from Covello's book, he describes his own upbringing as a child of Italian immigrants and reflects on his own life as he explores the activities and thoughts of Covello. In the preface, Vito suggests different approaches he might have taken: discussing Covello's central ideas in relation to his own experience, providing a critique of their significance for today, or offering a "personal reflection on the central

metaphor of Covello's autobiography, *The Heart is the Teacher*. And then chooses to combine all these approaches to present rich "Reflections on Leonard Covello and Community" (the book's subtitle).

This insistence on viewing life situations as whole and inseparable while fully recognizing the importance of analysis and detailed critique—and exploring the latter without sacrificing the significance of the former—is central to Vito Perrone's vision of education. That education is about community, democracy, and concern for the well being of all humanity is what makes Vito Perrone's vision and leadership so powerful and what has drawn so many of us into his circle. It is a world view that goes back directly to John Dewey—Vito told me once that he reads Dewey every summer for his own renewal and that it took him four readings of *Democracy and Education* before he understood it—who, good philosopher that he was, delighted in lengthy analysis and critique of ideas. But Dewey always emphasized the larger picture, the idea that education was *for* something. In a democratic society education is the "endeavor to shape the experiences of the young so that instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society be an improvement on their own" (Dewey, 1916, p. 79).

There is never any doubt that Vito has similar views about the role of education. Any educational practice needs to be assessed against its ability to contribute to building a society in which all members have increasing opportunity to participate fully in social and economic life, and in which every individual is better able to realize his or her potential within a socially interactive community.

Vito's work continued to expand after he came to Harvard as he continued to pursue his interests in teacher education, rural education, peace studies, and evaluation. He also received increasing recognition for his outstanding contributions. For example, in October 1998, he received the Fourth Annual Global Citizen Award from the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century. His speech on that occasion, in which he refers to both Dewey and Covello, emphasizes the need to have education support the growth of a democratic society.

The democratic society we need and desire is not yet with us. Education is not the whole of our future and the many imperatives that face us, but it is a central element. What is the

likelihood of schools actually serving students, families, and communities at more powerful levels? It is hard not to have a genuine sense of possibility kept alive when faced each day by the students that I am privileged to work with, whose intellectual and moral commitments are so large. (Perrone, 1998)

In April 2000, Vito suffered a massive stroke that left him in a coma for three months and in a rehabilitation hospital for another eight months. He returned home essentially unable to speak or walk unassisted. In the subsequent four years, with the full-time dedicated care of his wife, Carmel, who has both provided consistent support and found extraordinary professional resources to guide his recovery, Vito has worked with the same energy, spirit, and dedication he previously devoted to his professional work. Now, in the summer of 2005, he can again converse, walk, and travel. He recently returned to Lansing accompanied by his eldest son, Vito, Jr., to revisit the scenes of his youth; he attended the 2003 NDSG meeting in Cambridge, mentioned by Jay Featherstone; and, in February 2004, travelled to the next NDSG meeting at its usual location outside of Chicago. All of us for whom Vito has been a colleague, mentor, and friend are heartened by his continuing, steady recovery. Increasingly, Vito is engaged in lively professional conversations and continues his keen interest in the world and in education.

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