

HOW TO READ

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Chop Suey Is No Substitute For Brotherhood

Years ago, when both this field and I were each in our post-adolescence, I was a teacher in New York City of children designated as "mentally retarded." Not until much later did I better understand that, at least for "my children," special education was not terribly "special" and hardly "educational." As for the teacher, the designation of his class as the "Opportunity Room" was more of an announcement of what was in the offering for him than what was in store for the children. Notwithstanding, I loved those years and continue to this day to dredge up this or that incident, this or that crusade, this or that triumph, and of course this or that failure. Once, during that time, my mentor, the Director of that city's program for the mentally retarded, was asked to help devise a plan for the city to celebrate Brotherhood Week, an invention by bureaucrats which was supposed to take advantage of Abraham Lincoln's and George Washington's birthdays and, in some fashion, bring everyone together in more perfect racial, religious, and psychic harmony. Whether Brotherhood Week ever succeeded is not for me to determine, but Dick Hungerford's original committee was in every respect an unmitigated disaster. It seems that everyone wanted to make certain that he or she would be on the record for brotherhood and against fratricide, so each person felt compelled to outshout if not outthink the others on the issues before the group. What started out as a meeting of colleagues and, more or less, friends ended in chaos, with each member of the committee finally concluding that only he or she truly understood the meaning

of brotherhood and how to celebrate the ideal. Finally, out of a sense of despair and the functional need to "do something," a compromise was achieved. A notice would be sent to each district superintendent in the city advising the local leader that all schools should plan a Brotherhood Week celebration, and that such a celebration might well include faculty lunches or dinners at local Chinese or Italian restaurants.

The implicit question embedded throughout this paper asks how such a concept as "brotherhood" could be read and comprehended as "eating chop suey." Why do people misunderstand the most important events of their lives? Why do people read so poorly? Why are there some people who never make the attempt to read even when their very souls, if not lives, seem to depend on it?

People Don't Read

In our daily lives, most of us occupy ourselves with getting our work done rather than with the deepest issues or fundamental questions which give our work meaning. There are times when our attention is drawn to fundamental issues, but those times most often occur during ceremonial occasions, such as in church, when one is very sick or, if one is an academic, during commencement exercises and academic convocations. But truly, even those are merely the occasions when we proclaim rather than examine the meaning of our activities. Of course, when they "work" those times can inspire us, but those inspirations are usually little more than fleeting visions of the noble and serious purposes we are charged to serve, regardless of the momentary impact those occasions have on our lives. After the caps and gowns are folded away, after we have recovered from the dreaded illness, we return to the daily life in which we can only hope our work is true to the already fading vision. However, the

cultivation of that vision does not remain a part of that work, and even less so do we devote very much to examining or correcting what it reveals.

But this is not a lament. What we do in our daily lives is important work and important to do well. If every step of our existence had to be seen in its ultimate significance, our work would more likely cease than improve. My point is not that our work should change but that it could be illuminated by the addition of a reflective commentary on what we do. That is, we should spend more time and better time reading books, ideas, other people, ourselves.

Where can such an examination begin? For the mother or father, starting with one's child is a good place to begin. Or oneself. For the doctor, there is always the patient and one's mortality, in addition to the New England Journal of Medicine. And for the teacher, or the teacher of teachers? We can begin to read better, to think better, to know ourselves better. I don't want to be restrictive but, rather, to be suggestive. Hence, what follows are some ideas for people in education and special education, as well as those interested in children and schools (and who shouldn't be interested in children and schools?).

Are We Thinking About the Right Problems?

Educators don't often enough remember that their work is related to everything connected with life. We don't remember that education doesn't merely provide us with ways to understand life but it also offers guidance on how to live. Notwithstanding, educators read and write more about solving "school puzzles" than "life's puzzles." Consequently, we spend an awful lot of time in the schools teaching children to read better, but not very much time worrying about why their parents don't or can't read, or why there are thousands and

maybe millions of children who never learn to read. And while we worry about "learning to read," we hardly ever seem to worry about the probability that too many children become adults who are neither literate in the broader sense of the word nor seem to know or care that they don't read and, if they did read, they don't read well--whether books, ideas, or other people.

While the schools still take a stab at teaching foreign languages, Americans aren't learning foreign languages in schools or elsewhere. Our businesses are handicapped in foreign markets, our diplomats make blunders and are caught unawares by international developments, and we seem to be digging ourselves into a parochialism that leaves us unable to comprehend or respond intelligently to the speech, customs or values of the rest of the world. And while bilingual programs proliferate in this country, there are few here who take seriously the policy implications of a nation where more and more people don't speak the same language. Rapidly, this country is becoming bilingual, with Spanish-speaking children comprising the fastest growing segment of the school population. Despite the existence of a "field" of Bilingual Education, the issue is in an impenetrable muddle. Who is asking if we can permit this country to become bilingual? Is anyone worrying about whether we can prevent it, if that became the national decision? Do we debate whether we should foster it? And looking behind bilingualism is the even more fundamental though less obvious prospect of multi-culturism. And what professors of education, superintendents of schools, or teachers, parents, and citizens are worrying that Americans aren't learning mathematics and science at the rate we should, and that while those programs are in notorious decline the support for science education keeps pace with the neglect and even abandonment of such programs in our schools and colleges. And while it's wonderful that

Time, Newsweek, and the New York Times, are informing us about micro-computers and how they will surely change much in the way we learn in schools and out of them, and how they will change our very lives, those of you who know what the public schools are like know too well that computer illiteracy is rampant there. And those of you who know what our Schools of Education are like have an even stronger sense that computer literacy is virtually nonexistent there.

There are many problems which we should be thinking about but we're not. There are problems about our conceptual world, such as "the models of humanity" which shape our ideals and practices, which are reserved only for commencement addresses. There are problems connected with our profession, such as the place of schools of education in education, which are only discussed when critics have time on their hands or when self-appointed panels feel compelled to deliver broadsides. There are problems connected with our society, such as those relating to the education of adults or infants, which are more commonly discussed in college catalogs than in college courses. When are we going to do ourselves a big favor and devote our energies and capabilities to the discussion of our most serious problems? When are we going to give ourselves some of the time we spend in front of the television tube or on the tennis court and intentionally come together to intentionally consider the problems which beset the human family? Some people claim that we are not thinking about the right problems these days. Some people may even claim that we are hardly thinking about anything significant these days.

How to Force Oneself to Think Better

To read better, one must think better. But to think better, one must do more than merely will it. An example: A few days ago, I attended the regular

monthly meeting of the Board of Visitors of the State School for the Mentally Retarded. I'm a member of that group, and the other members are valued friends, as is the institution's superintendent who is not only a friend but a former student. The Board was asked to consider a draft policy statement on "Human Sexuality of Clients." Here are some of the policies we were supposed to consider and, hopefully, endorse:

- (1) Any client who is 16 years or older, any client who is a parent of a child, any client who is married has the right to receive drugs or devices that are designed to regulate conception...
- (2) Masturbation is a normal, healthy and acceptable method of sexual expression. The staff's responsibility is to provide this reassurance to the client, while teaching that masturbation is to be performed in a private environment.
- (3) Homosexuality may or may not reflect an individual's "free choice." Human service programs, especially within large institutions, sometimes segregate persons by sex and otherwise impede the occurrence of typical heterosexual encounters. Therefore staff and volunteers should encourage clients to socialize with members of the opposite sex as part of the daily routine of life. This will place clients in a better position to make free choices about sexual preference.

It's not my purpose to debate or defend these or other policy statements contained in this guide. That's not the point. However, it is pertinent to remind ourselves that this is a policy document to deal with people who are legally, and for the most part essentially, incompetent. How will the "consent"

problem be dealt with? Is it possible for a person who is legally adjudicated "mentally incompetent" to give informed consent about such issues as contraception, sexual intercourse, abortion, even sterilization? So the question is eventually asked of the institutional superintendent, "Was there much debate during the development of these policies"?

"Not very much. We seem to be in fundamental agreement."

That's astonishing! Fifteen years ago, anyone who would have proposed contraception for institutionalized sixteen-year-olds, anyone who would have implied that it's permissible to be a homosexual and it's healthy to masturbate would have been thrown out of the institution in disgrace, if not arrested for impairing the morals of defenseless incompetents. As Szasz might have remarked, what was once the disease is today the cure. And there's hardly a murmur of disagreement. Why? It's what Seymour Sarason calls "unconscious world-views," the firmly held but usually unexamined beliefs each of us have about the world, beliefs which tend to determine the way we interpret virtually all events (Sarason, 1981). What was once an unthinkable much less an unmentionable idea is today an unassailable truth. Once, "everyone" believed that mentally retarded people are asexual and fundamentally amoral--that is, they neither care about sex, but that whatever sexual practices they engage in have nothing to do with their sex lives but everything to do with the mere fact that they go through the motions of living, of seeming to have sexual lives, or needs, or emotions. "Everybody" thought one way about the mentally retarded 50 years ago, and "everybody" thinks about them another way today. How we think about the sexuality of mentally retarded people is an example of what's wrong with the way we think.

What can we do about the problem of how people think? For one thing, we can call back that policy committee which put together the statement on human

sexuality and we can say to them something like this:

"Now we want you to create a new policy statement for the clients here. You have in front of you the draft statement you've all worked on these last few weeks. The task now is to develop a new statement, and you're given only one restriction. You may not include in this new statement any policy which you have already recommended in the previous draft. That is, you may not recommend that 16-year-old clients may elect to receive birth control drugs or devices. You may not decide that masturbation is a normal, healthy, and acceptable method of sexual expression. You may not include anything in this new set of guidelines which has already been laid down in the previous set of guidelines."

What could we hope to gain from such an exercise? For one thing, by not being permitted to authorize birth control for 16-year-olds, the group may reconsider a policy which would have permitted mentally retarded adolescents to make such decisions, when virtually all other 16-year-olds in America are not permitted by parents (irrespective of peer or other pressures) to decide for themselves whether they will see the gynecologist for an IUD. Again, my point isn't to debate the relative merits of birth control information for adolescents, but rather to free individuals to discuss these issues as little hampered as possible by their entrenched world views, views oftentimes so deep that they are unconscious, albeit strong and pervasive.

The purpose of this paper was to encourage people to try to read more and better. It was suggested that, to begin with, each of us must work hard to uncover important problems to think about. Then each of us must reserve appropriate time and energy to devote to those problems. And, lastly, each of us must intentionally seek ways to engineer escapes from our unconscious world views, those deep and pervasive beliefs which not only shape our thinking but all too easily prevent us from thinking. Some people read as they would look at the landscape from a moving car. Others read as they would watch a movie. This paper was written for those who want to do more than skim what can be learned, and more than examine the world with a too hurried eye and mind, and more than think to then forget so as to unclutter the brain so as

to be able to think and forget again, and again, and again. This paper was written for people who are prepared to change their lives every time they read a serious book or ponder a serious idea.

Reference

Sarason, Seymour B. Psychology Misdirected, New York: The Free Press, 1981.