PERSON   CENTERED   LEARNING

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PROLOGUE

Authoritarian   teaching and learning modes have been with us always. Humanistic tactics and strategies are of relatively recent vintage. This chapter suggests the advantages and disadvantages of the latter as well as delineating some"tools of the trade?' Illustrations evolve from the author's experience at several levels of teaching...with   practical examples that may be worthy of emulation. The author stresses the importance of maintaining perspective on specialization,   keeping a sense of humor and seeking to put learning into contexts of paradox and irony. The dangers of institutionalizing   an idea or process as well as looking forward with hope rather than backward with regret are also pointed out.

When *The Washington Post* runs an article, "A Holy War for Young Minds," subtitled, "Humanist Teachings Under Attack Across Nation," we know that free inquiry is once more under authoritarian   attack.   When we observe fundamentalists   attempting   to pass off creationism as "scientific," we know that the classical battle of science vs. religion is raging again. And hardly a week passes when some new group, perhaps funded by fundamentalist   TV contributions,   is not attacking the public school, a school board and/ or a legislature to make their will felt in both boardrooms   and classrooms.

This is not a history of those struggles, as interesting and disconcerting as that war may be. Nor is it an effort to enumerate   the 1001 incidents in which the anti-humanists   take up the battle cry in the name of "saving young minds," improving morality, preserving Biblical tradition   or other such. Rather, this is to discuss person-centered   learning as an humanistic   endeavor...an endeavor which has in many ways been very successful despite constant attack, despite the paranoia of opponents, despite the tendency of so many of us to quest for certainty or at least risk as much as possible despite our traitorous doubts.' Too, there is an illusion that we have been successful; otherwise, why the general attack on secular humanism...even   if research is not available to prove it!

Nobody who knows the history of humanism vs. authoritarianism   can forget the great contributors to the humanistic tradition, a list which would include Erasmus, John Stuart Mill, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell and others. But those contributing directly to person-centered learning in this century would certainly include Carl Rogers, Sidney Jourard,   Art Combs and Clark Moustakas.2 But once again, this essay will focus on PROCESS   rather than biography or history. It will focus on some of the modalities we have come to associate with person-centered   learning.   And it will attempt to discuss some of the results.

Comparison...

Among the better comparisons of the two major approaches to learning is that found in Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarium Conspiracy.* On the one hand the old paradigm emphasizes content and "right" information whereas the new paradigm stresses learning how to learn as well as contexts of learning. On the one hand, learning is PRODUCT whereas the newer view stresses PROCESS, the journey.

In the earlier view learning is hierarchical and authoritarian with rewards for conformity; in the latter instance it is egalitarian with dissent encouraged. Students and teachers are people and not roles; autonomy is encouraged.

The old paradigm stresses rigid structure and prescribed curriculums whereas the new focuses on flexibility; there are many ways to teach and learn. And so it goes, the old tends to be lock-step, compartmentalized; externals are real; guessing and divergent thinking is discouraged; the emphasis is upon the analytical, linear, labeling, norms, book knowledge. Classrooms are designed for efficiency, convenience, resistant to community input; it's to inculcate minimum skills; it is technologized and dehumanized; teachers have "the truth. "

On the other hand, guessing and divergent thinking are part of the creative process, whole-brain thinking complements the left; an individual's performance is seen in terms of potential; experience and experiment complement theory (a good theory *will* be practical). Classrooms reflect concern for lighting, color, air, the physical, and there must be room for both privacy and dynamic interaction. Learning is a life-long process, and technology is to enhance human relationships between teacher and learner...each learning from each.

Although this comparison is probably too dichotomous, it provides a good yardstick for walking into almost any learning situation to determine where teachers and learners are located on any number of continuums, as between authoritarianism and individualism, between dehumanism and humanism, between elitism and egalitarianism, between distrust and trust.3

While Carl Rogers' major contributions to humankind were in the psychological field, there is no question but his work suggests the need for openness, trust, active interaction between the inner human world and the outer regions of "empirical" reality. Likewise the John Dewey stress a basis for the entire progressive educational movement.4 In these modes, the only thing that is "sacred" is consistent devotion to the methods for building/ creating/ formulating knowledge. While, ironically enough, this, too, in the hands of an authoritarian can also create straight-jacketed situations, it is a major task of the humanistic learner or teacher to keep the method sufficiently flexible that it, too, may be modified for human ends and not those appealing to the authority of church, state or god, or simply to perpetuate the existence of an institution. If the latter does happen, then curse be the ideological ties that blind!

There is no sure chronological   age at which a human   being may step onto either authoritarian   or humanistic   track. As both Aeschylus and John   Milton so well knew, Prometheus   may be bound   under   many conditions.   The object is to unbind   him sufficiently   early to assure his (or her) continuous   vision and growth.

Loyola knew what he was talking about when he said that he could shape the life of a person if he could catch them early. The history of the Catholic Church is the story of that capture. Likewise, those who believe and act upon the view that humans have almost unlimited   potential and/ or have yet to realize their greatest fulfillment (per Abraham   Maslow and followers), they too have a long track record of achievement   with children   who become adolescents who become adults. At the Antioch School, in Yellow Springs, Ohio, for instance, teachers have for decades maintained   the open classroom during the first six grades. The resulting creativity is staggering in both quality and quantity.   Nor does a very high proportion   of the graduates of that school fail when they enter the more structured   middle and high schools. While today is certainly not the era ofthe open high school, there are still high school teachers who encourage   a large amount   of choice. Also, alternative schools, part of the movement   of the Sixties to free both curriculum   and students,   continue   to thrive. 5

I've read more than 3000 applications   for masters and doctoral programs during the past quarter century. No question: where high school learners have been encouraged to experiment, travel, enter other cultures, they are the persons who matriculate at the Antiochs, Goddards and Sarah Lawrences of this country for their undergraduate   programs. Once learners gain a taste of evolving their own programs, with some guidance, of course, it's hard to get them back into straight-jacketed   programs. But let us talk about processes for awhile.

THE TEACHER

Structured   or authoritarian   personalities   do   not   make   humanistic guides...unless   one equates humanistic   with some branches/ schools in the humanities (philosophy,   literature,   the history of art, etc.). If a teacher is afraid to risk her ∕ himself, surely he∕ she cannot expect to encourage learners to take risks! Surely if a teacher is forced to develop lesson plans laying out the work for her class so that somebody sitting in a principal's office will know what's happening   every minute (or even 10 minutes) every day, then one cannot expect much openness.   Also, students who learn by themselves ("by discovery")   or with minimum   teacher facilitation are likely to seem noisy, messy, sometimes   disorganized.   The   neat/"compleate"   school teacher and/ or officer will usually tolerate little of THAT!6 They frequently forget that "chaos breeds geniuses...(since)   it offers a man something to be a genius about!"7 In short, the classroom or the learning place is as much a state of mind as a space-time modality.

SOME TOOLS

Learning   Contracts...

In view of the diversity of learners, each with unique background and experience, the learning contract, now used from K through PhD, has become a remarkably effective means to formalize and humanize (but not mechanize) the relationship between teachers and students. This enables learners to state their objectives as well as indicate the resources and methods they will use to reach them. Also, at their best they include target dates as well as criteria that will be used to evaluate the work.

Having utilized these tools with learners at the graduate level and supervised high school student teachers using them, I can attest that they can be most humanistic in both initiating and facilitating learning processes. To achieve mutual agreement among the various parties (teacher, learner, institution) requires negotiation. To prevent abstractness and rigidity, flexibility and amending processes are needed. Insuring communication and understanding takes clarity of writing and/ or video construction. At best they enable learners to experience hands-on encounter with both theory and practice. They are also used in the spirit of participatory democracy since they can be expanded to include more than one learner where it makes sense to encourage collaborative learning. Surely one thing is clear: teachers cannot "lay down the law" on the one hand and encourage contract learning on the other without exposing both their illogic and their ambiguity; in either instance, learners may become their teachers' jesters, pointing out that like the emperor, they cannot go about naked! They encourage the humor in human.s

This is not to claim that using learning contracts is totally contradictory to computer processes. But if used, then a poem I once wrote, "Shades of Hal," suggests a warning:

> "Do you love me?"
> asked the student
> of his computer-tutor,
>
> "Of course," it said
> dials lighting rosy red.
>
> But tapes full spun
> more alientation begun.

Journal   Keeping...

Another powerful tool that has become more frequently used in humanistic learning is the personal journal. The literature of this genre has become increasingly sophisticated. This is merely to scratch the surface of humanistic possibility. Moving beyond the "dear diary" stage of record keeping, the more complex journal theory and practice includes every manner of human development. Whereas the diaries of Puritan Massachusetts focused on con-science-keeping, it is fair to say that today's journals are more likely con-

sciousness-keeping...whether   May Sarton in *The Journal of Solitude* or her subsequent journals (which are strong on the relationships between art and consciousness)   or Ira Progoff in his insightful *At A Journal   Workshop,* delineating   the many "technologies"   of mining human awareness.9 In many respects a journal entry becomes an important   referent by which to "measure" or appreciate   the contours of one's growth, change or even regression. Having experimented   with almost every type of log (dream, sports, book-reading, research process/ progress, reflection, poetry), I have felt free to encourage "my" learners to try every nameable form of human recording (using all of the senses, using every mode of recording...written,   video, audio, camera, etc.).

The result over more than two decades: an enormous   amount   of self validation   and empowerment,   self-discovery,   self-confidence   with similar quality of verifiable "production"   (of books, of poetry, of social inventions, and organizations).   It is easy to establish the causal connections   between logging and this "production,"   but many of the results may have been secondary. Once persons discover themselves, they feel released from the most crippling cultural and/or.educational   bondage and are free to experi- ment with new modes of expression   and experience.

Of course there are dangers in using this tool: namely, skating on thin ice of narcissism, falling victim to the Pygmalion complex. Yet, once the journaling process is fully understood   by all parties in the learning process, there can be less scapegoating,   less psychological denial. Too, both learners and teachers (facilitators)   have much data with which to work.

As 1 once indicated   to a group of students   whom I was coaxing   to use this tool:

"A log can express you; a log is you; a log reflects being; it is being...and   being can range the full gamut from logical, linear, cognitive, exquisitely rational beauty, such as E=mc2, to the wildest most delightful ambiguity in a haiku such as

'Americans   scramble
up glistening cobweb ladders
which dry in noon suns.'

"With a little work I could date this haiku; also by referring to another   kind of one-line log, which was a kind of progress report to myself during a leave of absence, I could tell what else happened   to me (for me, at me, by me, etc.)that day.But better that the cobweb (outside my study window on the Maine Coast that summer day) have me happen to it."10

An Alternative   Viewpoint:

"Johnny,   pay attention!"
"Johnny,   narrow perception!"
"Johnny,   wake up!" the cosmos hiccoughed
and killed a world view..."

Schooling/ Learning/Observing

Because we are all too prone to equate "going to school" with learning; all too frequently we miss the humanistic potentials of daily interaction between all persons and factors in the learning process. Add. credentialing to this missed potential, and all too frequently routinization   leads to mechanization leads to dehumanization...the   diametrically   reverse of what humanists attempt to create and perpetuate. I once attempted   to describe this via metaphor;   namely,

> Students eat my dittoes
> and
> I return each morning
> to see print
> fading in their eyes and stomachs
> so
> I go back
> to my typewriter
> to scribble
> .a curriculum
> on flowing sheets
> of water.

Somebody   once asked me what qualities a teacher should have to be humanistic. It would have been easy to give that person a list of characteristics she needed in order to qualify. Rather, I chose the "koan" approach, citing Carl Rogers' famous statement that he didn't know anything personally that he could teach anybody...also   Alan Watts' view that he "had a particularly good teacher; he didn't teach me anything."12

This did not satisfy the young woman in the narrow sense, so she continued her querying.

"Why did I remain so accessible to learners?"

"Because I care for persons and not individuals playing the role of student."

"Why do you prefer the term 'learner' to 'student'?"

"Because I am a learner, too, and believe that I learn most if I expose myself to similar information or experiences that learners do...and at about the same time, too, insofar as I can do that. Also I think that this term narrows the hierarchical differences between teacher and 'student'. I just happened to get here before you did!"

"But how can you identify with a learner whose viewpoint is so different than your own?" she asked.

I paused a bit on this one, for I knew she was of different philosophic persuasion than mine. Finally, I replied, "By knowing as much as possible about   many fields and especially   knowing   interdisciplinary   analytic

approaches.   Then I can weigh the pros and cons of other systems with that person and not get so hung up on the differences."

"But doesn't that take a lot of work and a lot of patience?"

"Yes," I said, "but I never said it was easy!"

"But what about the patience?"

"Not easy for me," I admitted,   "but, to quote Wordsworth,   'perhaps   I've gained some of the years that bring the philosophic   mind'?,,'3

She persisted, getting ever the more personal.   "To what do you attribute   your own successes with humanistic   learning?"

Since I am rarely self-conscious   of "success" in an external   sense, I resisted the question.   "Who says I'm successful?"

"My classmates   and others who have worked with you. You have a reputation,   you know."

I laughed and responded,   "Yeah, infamous."   We laughed together.

After musing a moment or three, I said, "Well, I suppose I've outlined some of the reasons, patience, hard work, wide ranges of learning, but I also think that humanists   need a good sense of humor and by 'sense' I mean ability to initiate laughter as well as appreciate the varying contexts in which it works best to bring out the humor in humans. I've said many times that laughter may be our last best hope. Oh, and one further thing: paying attention   to details which are important   to learners with whom I am working. This sometimes leads to trivial pursuing from my viewpoint, but frequently a tiny detail to me is an Everest for an adult learner with whom I am working. The tough part: developing enough empathy to know the difference. Also, I have found   over the years that it is important   to listen at several levels simultaneously.   "

My interrogator   wrinkled up her brow and asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, I'm no therapist or psychiatrist,   but I can hear pain in both words and body language. I've gotten better at reading those meanings. Also, after having worked with hundreds of people, one-on-one,   at very close range, I do not see much distinction   between learning and therapy. If I am going to communicate   and practice the ancient science and art of education   in its original intent, 'to draw out,' I cannot behave otherwise as a humanist."

"But," my learner-friend   persisted, "Isn't this dangerous?   Don't you run the risk of 'playing god'?"

"Dangerous,   yes, for nobody knows enough about another, nor can anybody catch all the nuances of human perception   and experience.   About 'playing

god': if you define that in some ways, I suppose there is a danger. But I try never to 'operate' out of authoritarian contexts. And as Bertrand Russell once warned in his famous *New Decalogue,* 'Have no respect for the authority of others, for there are always contrary authorities to be found.'14 In fact, you must be careful yourself when looking at humanistic learning not to use me as an authority! Simply use me as part of the process of understanding. "

She laughed. We mused a bit together and she went off into the campus twilight.

ANOTHER   PERSONAL   PERSPECTIVE...

One other personal exchange may be worthy of citation. Asked by a UGS graduate, who is also a Vietnam veteran, to send him a list of "ten things I'd learned that might be worth sharing," I sent him twelve, among which: 15

...to be of use (in terms of serving society), you must take abuse;

...the closer you are to the center of socio-politico-economic power, the less you have to achieve humanistic ends;

...escape from freedom is not only individual but also endemic/ pandemic/ cosmic;

...person-centered learning demands trust in what another may learn that may contradict one's own views;

...deny a reality, psychologically, and it's more likely to deny your freedom to choose alternative ways of being;

...poetry ("poetry") may well be the only humanizing "reality;"

   mastery of a field" (discipline) or "professionalism" in the 20th century are cop-outs and delusions; two human masteries/ mysteries which may (?) be safe: a) mastery of alternative philosophical methodologies; and b) appreciation and practice of irony, paradox and humor.

It takes little sensitivity to note the contradictions within my own insights; yet, I recall with joy Emerson's view that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.!"16

INSTITUTIONAL   IMPLICATIONS

When a definitive history of humanistic learning modalities is written, it will have to include careful descriptions and analyses of two institutions with which I have worked; namely, the Antioch-Putney Graduate School of Education and the Union Graduate School of the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities. There is ample raw material for perceiving both these schools and comparing them with Fielding Institute, the several models of Universities Without Walls, Saybrook Institute, etc.17 Suffice it to say

here that efforts to communicate our humanistic intentions to the accrediting agencies is the story of storm and strife, skepticism, utilizing traditionally educated evaluators, anger among ourselves. Unfortunately,   yet paradox- ically, it's almost beyond imagination to start a humanistic revolution, then look to the authorities   "to supply the guns" in a society that is long on credentialing   and short on creating matrices for understanding   learning processes. At its very best accrediting and/ or evaluating both programs and processes is superficial; at its worst it is absurd.   Also, it has been difficult to break the stranglehold empiricists have held to define and evaluate research in quantitative   terms when, indeed, most life and learning is qualitative/ phenomenological...   *if it's to be humanistic!*

CONCLUSION...

In short, there are many illustrations of humanistic learning in a variety of "experimental"   institutions,   K through Ph.D., in these United States. Also, there are teacher-facilitators   working in traditional institutions, sometimes unsung,   usually taking   risks and under   fire from those pushing "professionalism"   (guaranteeing mediocrity, simply by definition). While we . in person-centered   programs may have achieved accreditation   from the accreditors, their swords always hang low over our heads...because we know they will be back...again, again and again. And far too many persons engaged in humanistic learning modalities are too willing to strike Mephistophelean bargains or modify processes because of fear of what the accreditors "might say" or "might do," hence strengthening authoritarian   forces. And in order to continue   to strive for humanistic   interaction   between learners and facilitators,   the politics of it all almost demands that we behave as though teaching were, indeed, a "subversive activity. "IS But ironically enough, this is doubly dangerous, for it can lead to paranoia and closed contexts which produce   just the opposite effect from that intended.   So the "eternal vigilance" imperative means careful monitoring of both inner and outer forces that impinge upon the learning process.

But it is my conviction that we humanists must go forward with hope rather than look backward with regret. Events forged in the smiths of experience and belief in human futures are bound to effect new contexts which become new contexts which become...

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