

The Power of the Fragile

John F. Covaleskie
Northern Michigan University

We become what we love. Our destiny is in our desires, yet what we seek to possess soon comes to possess us in thought, feeling, and action. That is why the ancient Greeks made the education of *eros*, or passionate desire, the supreme aim of education.¹

That we become what we love is why aesthetic play is so important to education: it is in this way that *eros* is both expressed and shaped, as education both follows and shapes the tastes and interests of the child.

What struck me throughout the reading of Margaret Macintyre Latta's essay was a sense of being asked, not to see, but to remember, a truth about human existence too easy to forget in a utilitarian world: education is about what we come to love more than it is about what we come to know. In this understanding we come to see the vast gulf that exists in our culture between education and schooling. Education is about how to live; schooling has become about how to produce and consume.

In one sense, I feel disappointment in her essay: when all is said and done I want it to contain something more profound than the obvious truth that education is about the whole person, not just the intellect; that education must change our perception of the world for it to be education worthy of the name.

Shortly after the attack on the World Trade Center, Steven Jay Gould reflected that, although good is more fragile than evil, it is also far more common:

Good and kind people outnumber all others by thousands to one. The tragedy of human history lies in the enormous potential for destruction in rare acts of evil, not in the high frequency of evil people. Complex systems can only be built step by step, whereas destruction requires but an instant.²

Is there any play that is not aesthetic, that does not engage us in the ways Latta describes? Play is educational, just as it and education are both aesthetic. This is not to suggest that education is play, as opposed to work. To think this way is to confuse ourselves with the creation of a false dichotomy. Rather, play is work, just exactly as education is. Deborah Meier suggests that one of the reasons for the success of Central Park East Secondary School was that the people who created it were elementary school teachers attempting to create a secondary school as much in the image of a good kindergarten as possible. She reminds us:

I see the spirit [of kindergarten] I'm referring to as fundamental to all good education; wouldn't it be wonderful, after all, if high school students were as deeply absorbed in their "work" as five-year-olds are in their "play"?³

This is just the opposite of the way schools today are typically oriented, where the academic demands that just might be appropriate to the upper grades are imposed on ever-younger children.

How did we ever forget that learning is about the heart at least as much as the mind, about perception at least as much as about intellect, that it is about work in the

sense of production, of making, of meaningful activity; that it is about work as play, not the drudgery of labor. Indeed, more than “at least as much”; true education is about heart and perception and the joy of play *before* it can be about intellect; education must first engage the heart, causing us to attend to the discipline with sufficient intellectual attention to come to master it. We might say that the heart must be engaged with the joy of intellectual activity before it can be something that students pursue with delight. Just as we do not play in order to reach some end, because playing is its own end, so, too, when we are learning in ways that are true to our humanity, we are not learning for some end beyond the learning; the learning is its own end. This state is common in life, but rare in school; it is everywhere powerful and fragile.

How did we come to believe that education is training of the intellect, and little more than that, at least little more of consequence than that? Certainly, part of this is the Western heritage that defines humanity in terms of its intellect, rather than in terms of affect. This is to some degree a remnant of Greece that has come to us through the Enlightenment, but even so, this is a serious distortion of the Greek ideal that saw beauty and truth so closely connected. The tradition that survives privileges truth, and the pursuit thereof, as a goal of education to the detriment, to the utter neglect, of beauty. Even when examples of beauty come to the center of the curriculum, in the study of poetry or literature, for example, they are too often studied in terms of technique, of plot, of character, as objects to be examined and analyzed—to be understood, rather than to be appreciated or simply experienced—to be thought apart rather than to be appreciated as a whole.

Understanding is not to be undervalued, but it is not everything, either. Critical thinking, rationality, is a big part of human life, and it is vital in some parts of life. John Dewey is right to emphasize intelligence as a verb, a way of acting. Intelligence, Dewey tells us, is acting so that our actions bring us closer to our goals.⁴ This requires rationality, critical thinking, and this should be developed in education. It is part of schooling, part of education.

But that is not all of education. Feelings and perceptions also need education, development. Though this is the least important part of schooling as we know it, it is the most important part of education. Certainly the emphasis on facts that is built into the testing and accountability movement has taken the focus off the affective parts of education. But the truth is that this aspect of education was in short supply before the testing movement. Even a cursory reading of Dewey (to say nothing of Mark Twain) makes that clear.

Good teaching has always required courage, as Parker Palmer reminds us.⁵ This is not only because good teaching is difficult, but because teachers must expose themselves to their students and must take chances. Just as Latta must work to keep things centered as a pot emerges from a lump of clay, so too the teacher must keep the class centered on what Palmer calls “the great thing”—the material under consideration that is at the center of any real class. Like the pot on a wheel, a class that is alive (that is, one that is not defined by a teacher delivering a lecture) is in constant motion, sometimes threatening to spin off center and out of control. Like

a master potter, the teacher must always sense and hold the center as the material forms a new thing—a pot, or an idea.

The other thing that we need to remember is that the teacher, unlike the potter, does not work alone. If the class is to stay centered, is to produce something valuable and beautiful and, yes, fragile, it must do so under the guidance of the teacher/potter, but it must first give assent. The children in a class are not clay; they are apprentice potters, and they must be brought into our dance, to mix metaphors; our dance must also become theirs. This is as risky for them as it is for us, and they perceive less reason for taking the risk than we might. They are even more fragile, being less assured and less experienced than we are. And so we must find a way to share with them the joy of our dance, teach them the joy of working at this wheel.

In the end, I think I realize my disappointment mentioned before is not with Latta's paper, but with my society, with myself, and with my practice. How easily I lose sight of the fragile truth that makes learning powerful and robust: education is about beauty. It must, first and above all, be an affirmation of life. Anything less than that is too crushing to be fragile, and too dead to have power.

1. Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997), xiii.

2. Steven Jay Gould, "A Time of Gifts," *The New York Times*, 26 September 2001. Electronic edition.

3. Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 47.

4. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916/1944/1966).

5. Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).