Teaching and the Sense of Tradition: A Nontraditionalist Perspective

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Human beings cannot develop and sustain an identity without a moral source.[1] People need a moral source, or horizon, in order to assess what is better and what is worse, what is good and what is bad, what is worth striving for and what is of lesser value, what is the best way to regard and treat other persons, and more. Without such a framework, people lose their bearings in the world. They become unmoored, demoralized, no longer capable of maintaining an identity. Even the most outspoken relativist, who might claim that every person can and should fashion values any way she pleases, thereby acknowledges that he is operating from a moral horizon which says it is good, it is right, it is proper, it is better, for individuals to be entirely self-made rather than not to be.

Teachers need a moral horizon, too. They work in a practice, or so I will claim, which calls on them to serve children and youth. Teachers help students to broaden rather than to narrow their sympathies and understandings, to deepen rather than to render more shallow their insight and knowledge, and to extend rather than to restrict their imagination and wonder at life and human possibility. Teachers need a moral framework that supports their working in this spirit, rather than, say, conceiving their work as self-serving or as merely a form of socialization or enculturation.[2]

I want to suggest that cultivating a sense of tradition about teaching can provide teachers with a powerful moral source for sustaining their practice. A sense of tradition enables teachers to keep their work tethered to the aim of helping students grow intellectually and morally. It strengthens them in resisting the ever-present pressure to instrumentalize education, that is, to place it in the service of ends separated from the work teachers and students do together. The sense of tradition provides teachers a standpoint from which to criticize present educational convictions and doings, their own as much as those which are widespread in contemporary society.

In a pluralistic culture, the idea of tradition in teaching may make educators uneasy. Talk of entering a practice with a tradition behind it may seem, at first glance, to tip the scales in favor of the past. It may appear more backward- than forward-looking. It might seem to impart a certain sanctity to ideas, concepts, and methods from days of yore, which we supposedly inherit and to which we must adhere. Roy Rappaport describes sanctity as "the quality of unquestionable truthfulness imputed by the faithful to unverifiable propositions."[3] That definition mirrors why some educators may equate tradition with traditionalism. The latter term denotes an uncritical, even slavish obedience to the past, a past, moreover, which many regard as marked by injustice and evil. Educators confronted with the idea of tradition in teaching might say: Not sanctity and a return to the past, but critique and hope for the future.

However, tradition and traditionalism are not the same. Tradition in teaching provides a way of steering clear of "-isms." A sense of tradition equips teachers to be wary of axe-grinding and dogmatic approaches to pedagogy. A sense of tradition provides teachers with a means for standing back, in a reflective spirit, from both the immediacies of teaching and the public debates surrounding what they should be doing in the classroom. In turn, the sense of tradition helps teachers fashion an identity which can assist them to keep in view the service dimensions that are built into the practice. I do not presume that I can elucidate these claims adequately in a single paper. But to show how they can be substantiated, I will examine three aspects of the idea of tradition and address how they pertain to teaching. They are (1) what it means to speak of a "living" tradition, (2) how tradition influences a person engaged in a particular practice, and (3) why it is useful to think of practitioners as involved in a "conversation" with tradition.

A Living Tradition

Alasdair MacIntyre examines the notion of a living tradition.[4] A living tradition, he argues, is one which undergoes more or less constant modification and adjustment. Since no tradition of practice, be it poetry or teaching or cross-country racing, exists in a social or historical vacuum, its practitioners are permanently subject to any number of broad social influences. For example, teachers work in an ethos characterized by diverse, often competing conceptions of what teaching is for. Some educators and members of the public claim that the aims of teaching are academic in nature, while others argue that they are social, cultural, political, religious, or economic. A living tradition responds to this kind of ethos through the agency of its practitioners: what they believe, how they conduct themselves, and what they bequeath to those who come after them (in their role as "precursors," a term I return to below). In a living tradition, according to MacIntyre, practitioners do not simply sail with the prevailing wind. Instead, they chart a course that guides them toward the highest possibilities embedded in their practice. They cannot chart that course from nowhere. They need tradition. A practice and a tradition go hand-in-hand.

According to MacIntyre, a practice is distinct from the institutions or occupational strata in which it is carried out. Practicing medicine or the law are not identical with working in a hospital or a law firm. Teaching is not the same thing as being employed by a school or district, despite the fact that most teaching takes place within such institutions. Posed differently, teaching is not identical with schooling. Practices like teaching have distinctive shapes, concerns, and activities that differentiate them from institutions. For example, according to MacIntyre's analysis institutions often privilege what he calls "external" over "internal" rewards.[5] In both formal and tacit ways, an institution may push for better salaries, increased benefits, heightened prestige and status, a good reputation, and so forth. All of these rewards may have their value. In contrast, however, the "internal" rewards of a practice like teaching — for example, having a positive influence on a child — cannot be as easily measured or categorized. Nor are they scarce or fixed in scope, as tends to be the case with external rewards like salary and other benefits. Internal rewards are potentially unlimited and they are accessible to any serious-minded teacher.

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MacIntyre shows how internal rewards derive from committing oneself to the terms of the practice — from giving oneself over to them, so to speak. Teachers who work hard to plan good lessons, to listen to students, to devote thought and care to evaluation, and to think about the environment in the classroom and school, open the door to the fulfillment and satisfaction that can accompany helping students learn and grow. And that fulfillment can motivate teachers to greater heights of effort and imagination, thereby positioning them for that much deeper a sense of internal reward from teaching.

Studies have shown that many teachers stay in the field precisely because of its powerful internal rewards. Moreover, a number of scholars who have studied classroom work have illuminated the ways in which we can think of teaching as a practice.[6] One way to summarize the lessons from their research is to say that teaching has to do with cultivating students' minds and spirits. Posed differently, teaching pursues changes in students that are broadening, deepening, liberating, and enriching. Such terms suggest that teaching has to do with intellectual and moral growth — in teachers as well as in students, which recalls MacIntyre's notion of the internal rewards that can accrue from engrossing oneself in the practice. Teaching is a continuous activity of encouraging or fueling attitudes, orientations, and understandings which allow students to progress rather than to regress as human beings, to grow rather than to become narrow in their outlook and range of capabilities. From the perspective of the idea of a practice, teaching is steeped in presuppositions about the substance of a flourishing life.

At this juncture, the idea that the practice of teaching has a tradition comes into play. The practice is older than the current institutions in which much of it is housed. To judge from its tradition, whose roots go back at least as far as the likes of Socrates and Confucius, teaching is a publicly conducted endeavor involving (typically) an adult working with other people's children or with adults. Teachers lead or guide others to know what they did not know before, to articulate or apprehend what they did not know they knew, to do things they could not do before, and to embrace potentially better or more dynamic attitudes and beliefs than previously held ones. For example, through a series of classroom activities, a teacher might help students realize that they can accomplish things through their own initiative rather than submitting passively to the lead of others. Such notions suggest an intellectual and moral ascension. They imply expanding rather than contracting the horizons of thought and conduct. They often involve questioning contemporary values and beliefs, not with the intent of rejecting them necessarily but rather to hold them up against a larger backdrop than those values and beliefs can themselves provide. These notions of what the work is about have emerged from history and tradition in the practice of teaching. Those same ideas call attention to the fact that tradition in teaching is not something determinate. Tradition and its voice alter, if ever so slightly, with the entrance on the scene of each new teacher who brings to bear a distinctive intellectual and moral sensibility.

All of this is another way of underscoring the point that tradition is not traditionalism. The latter describes what might be called a dead tradition, an inert,

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fixed set of activities and ideas oblivious to the larger world, including to the perhaps legitimate purposes that originally gave the tradition its impetus. In a living tradition, matters are otherwise. As I will argue in the next two sections, individuals can shape the nature and the outcomes of a practice even as they remain under its nurturing and steadfast influence. I suggested previously that teaching means broadening, deepening, and enriching students' lives. But as the embodiment of a living tradition, teaching declares no preset limitation or boundary on such changes. That is why I also emphasized that the sense of tradition can propel teachers to strive for the highest possibilities embedded in the practice. Part of being a teacher is to learn to identify just those possibilities, in students and in oneself.

The Influence of Tradition

Harold Bloom illuminates the interplay between person and tradition in a study of how artists and writers, and especially poets, respond to their precursors. According to Bloom, a poet cannot "choose" whether to take her precursors seriously or not. She cannot choose whether to regard poetry as having a tradition behind it. "What happens," Bloom asks rhetorically, "if one tries to write, or to teach, or to think, or even to read without the sense of a tradition?"[7] He answers his own question:

> Why, nothing at all happens, just nothing. You cannot write or teach or think or even read without imitation, and what you imitate is what another person has done, that person's writing or teaching or thinking or reading. Your relation to what informs that person *is* tradition, for tradition is influence that extends past one generation, a carrying-over of influence.[8]

According to Bloom, without tradition and the precursors who have created it, a person cannot become a poet — or teacher, thinker, reader, and so on. But tradition serves as more than the source of a beginning. Posed differently, tradition is more than that which is imitated. As Bloom notes, it has to do with what "informs" those whom a person (initially) imitates. Tradition comprises a background set of questions, concerns, and aspirations that continuously evolves as individuals in one generation respond to the efforts and projects of those who preceded them in the particular practice. The sense of tradition becomes the spur to something new and original.

However, the creative process is complicated and difficult. Bloom describes the influence of tradition as "the giving that famishes the taker."[9] Poetry and its influence beckon the person to write, they "give" her a trajectory without which she could not begin at all. But they also "famish" her, for how is she to create anything when she confronts a "sea of poetry, of poems already written"?[10] How can the poet become more than merely an imitator? How can she obtain critical distance from the ocean of poetry that precedes and now surrounds her? How can there be any "new" poems at all?

According to Bloom, a sense of tradition provides a response to these intimidating questions. It does so, in part, by turning the poet to her own origins as a reader and listener — as a person for whom poetry became real, as a person who responded to tradition in the first place. In Bloom's words: "Trying to write a poem takes the poet back to the origins of what a poem *first was for him*, and so takes the poet back

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beyond the pleasure principle to the decisive initial encounter and response that began him."[11] The turn to origins goes "beyond" the pleasure principle because those origins reside in an exchange *in* the world rather than in some inner psychological domain. That is, the "decisive initial encounter" that "began" the poet was when poetry first came into her orbit — or, better perhaps, when poetry first drew her into *its* orbit and thereby changed what the world was for her. Posed differently, she did not grasp poetry as merely another object to consume or to satiate a restless ego. Poetry grasped her. The sense of tradition takes a person out of the realm of mere impulse and ego and positions her to discern what Michael Oakeshott calls "the voice of poetry" in the conversation of humanity.[12] The poet writes because she must respond to that voice, because of her engagement with poetry and her hope to say something herself. If she heeds this beckoning and persists, she may, in turn, alter the tradition and its future by becoming herself a precursor to as yet unformed poets.

The sense of tradition both connects *and* distances the poet from the vast ocean of poetry that precedes her. It enables her to help conserve a form of life — in this case, reading, reciting, pondering, and writing poetry — and to transform that form of life as she enters the scene and responds in her own way. In this light, the sense of tradition funds human freedom, understood as the capacity to offer a positive answer to the earlier question, Can there ever be anything new in a practice like poetry?

This viewpoint holds in an analogous fashion for a person who feels pulled or drawn toward a life in teaching. By developing a sense of tradition, such a person makes it that much more possible to craft, in his or her original way, a positive answer to the questions Can teachers do anything new? Can they do more than merely imitate and replicate? Can teaching become more than just socializing the young into expected custom and belief? The sense of tradition provides both guidance and a provocation to take one's own agency as teacher seriously. Some further analysis can buttress this claim.

The Conversation with Tradition

Hans-Georg Gadamer articulates the idea of a conversation between past and present.[13] His analysis of tradition sheds helpful light on its critical potential. Where Bloom addresses tradition and poetry, Gadamer considers the arts more broadly, including poetry, literature, and painting. He examines philosophical writing as well. His fundamental claim is that such works can continue to "speak" today. That is, part of what constitutes them as works of art or philosophy is their capacity to continue to address people in the present. The voices within those works question our beliefs and aims. They illuminate forgotten ideas and possibilities. They point the finger at our various shortcomings. But they also reveal, through their own limitations and character, the distinctiveness of the present, the fact that it is something other than a pale replica of the past.

According to Gadamer, a play by Sophocles is more than words on printed page, and more than merely a particular story written by a particular person at a particular time. A Sophoclean drama is a living entity that can genuinely move, disturb, perplex, and capture the imagination of a reader today. Through a long and elaborate

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argument, Gadamer seeks to show that a contemporary reader's response to such a drama is a potential *constituent* of that drama as a work of art, that is, as an element of tradition.[14] The drama cuts across differences in time, place, and circumstance, and it "speaks again" in conversation with the present. This means that the play submits itself in turn, metaphorically speaking, to the contemporary reader's questions — for example, about the nature of religious belief, or of virtue, or of justice, or of the best political arrangements, and so forth.

Of course people can and do treat past works of art and philosophy as lifeless objects. People can and do regard them as so many outdated, outmoded curiosities, hardly fit partners for purposes of a genuine conversation. Others stare at or read these works through a one-way window formed out of present concerns and aspirations. They pick and choose those aspects that confirm or support their present states of mind. Gadamer suggests that these habits result from what he calls human "prejudice," or, more precisely, unexamined prejudice. People bring to past works of art and philosophy just what they bring to many of their present projects and relationships: a host of variously harmonizing and conflicting assumptions, understandings, desires, and more, many of which they are not aware. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that all persons, in one way or another, or at one time or another, find it difficult to be receptive to what is different - including the voice of tradition. "We are always affected," Gadamer writes, "in hope and fear, by what is nearest to us, and hence we approach the testimony of the past under its influence. Thus it is constantly necessary to guard against overhastily assimilating the past to our own expectations of meaning."[15]

Gadamer neither condemns nor laments the power of prejudices. Time and again, he emphasizes that persons cannot adopt the so-called "view from nowhere" that has entered the human imagination thanks, in part, to science. That view presumes that people can regard the world in an unbiased, value-free manner. The view is chimerical, according to Gadamer. He argues that it is impossible to do away with all prejudices, and he regards the assumption that we can do so as itself a prejudice that we should learn to overcome. Like numerous other critics in our time, Gadamer argues that the explanatory ambitions of positivist science, predicated as they are on an allegedly prejudice-free standpoint, constitute an inappropriate model for the task of understanding one another, our hopes and our fears, and our deepest possibilities as human beings. *If* our aim is to understand what we can do to lead flourishing lives, Gadamer cautions us not to strive for a supposedly neutral standpoint, but to accept the agency of prejudices as enabling us to connect with the world and with each other in the first place.

Posed differently, we should not strain to purge ourselves of prejudices as if they were pathological flaws, but rather work them out through the engagement with tradition and our present situations. Gadamer argues that the voice of tradition can open the one-way window fashioned by the self. It can bring a person in touch with his or her prejudices, and place the person on the road to criticizing and possibly transforming them. To expose one's thought and sensibility to a Sophoclean drama, to a Japanese rock garden, to a music form from the tenth century, to a poem by Emily

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Dickinson, can help one engage new ideas and possibilities for human expression and relation. Those ideas and possibilities are not mere replicas of the past. They are not inert or lifeless artifacts. They are a dynamic amalgam of what the playwright, sculptor, composer, or poet attempted to do, with the questions, concerns, and insight of the contemporary person. For example, Dickinson may write about the promise and the pain in renouncing present inclinations in favor of something larger than them. But that idea comes alive, in always altered form, because the reader has taken it seriously by infusing it with his or her own questions, sentiments, and worries about the place of inclination in crafting a life — questions and worries the reader may not have hitherto understood, but mostly felt. Dickinson affects the reader's thinking and emotions, and possibly his or her prejudices about inclinations and desires. However, the relation is reciprocal. The reader affects the meanings expressed by the poem by bringing to bear on it his or her own sensibility. If that reader becomes a poetry teacher or critic — or a poet — he or she might affect how people perceive the poem in the future. The reader might have such an affect, indirectly, merely by sharing his or her response with others. In the conversation with tradition, Gadamer suggests, neither the poem nor the reader remain the same.

From the point of view of Gadamer's argument, teachers become teachers, in part, through engaging with tradition. They learn about the meaning and the terms of the practice from their precursors and from a broad variety of related sources. That process can uncover their deepest presumptions about what the work entails and why a person would take it up. At the same time, teachers who confront tradition in teaching position themselves to extend, in a critical spirit, the boundaries of the practice. They can reply to tradition in a way which harmonizes their hopes to be of service, in their own distinctive ways, with the obligations that characterize the work.

Conclusion: The Sense of Tradition as a Source of Moral Direction

According to a recent line of philosophical argument, all persons need a moral horizon or framework to be persons, that is, to have and to sustain an identity. Such a horizon need not be understood as permanent or immutable. It can change over time and through the vicissitudes of life. Nonetheless, a moral framework or source seems indispensable for a person to make his or her way meaningfully, rather than randomly, through the world.[16]

I have presumed that these claims hold for teachers as the occupants of a historically vital practice. A sense of tradition can help constitute the moral source of what teachers do and why they do it. It can serve this role, in part, because the sense of tradition and traditionalism differ. The latter invites unquestioned obedience to past customs and beliefs, while the former resists unquestioned obedience to present customs and beliefs. The sense of tradition makes it possible to learn from past efforts while also addressing current concerns and problems. It offers teachers a standpoint that provides critical distance from what they have learned about the practice and from what others in society are telling them comprises the work. Posed differently, the sense of tradition fuels the power to abstract from immediate demands and activities. This does not mean sidestepping those activities and

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demands, but rather placing them against a broader backdrop. The sense of tradition provides a source of judgment and an enduring wellspring of remembrance that teaching means serving human flourishing.

With the use of ideas from MacIntyre, Bloom, and Gadamer, I have argued that a sense of tradition can help teachers appreciate that their work has meaning in its own right, rather than solely because it is a socially sanctioned activity or because it leads to socially approved outcomes. That sense can help all who teach regard their interaction with students as what Oakeshott describes as a scene of learning.[17] It can assist teachers in deflecting the pressure to instrumentalize what they do, to see it all as merely a scene of preparation for something else that is no concern of theirs. Moreover, the sense of tradition can help teachers recognize that their work has its distinctive features which are neither idiosyncratic nor discretionary. In metaphorical terms, the practice and its tradition choose teachers to join it, rather than just the other way around. The practice embodies a voice which can question and enlighten all who teach about what the work entails, a voice that can be discerned the moment one begins to take seriously the efforts of precursors. But it is not a voice to heed uncritically. The practice and its tradition can prosper only if teachers learn to reach beyond the ocean of teaching that precedes and surrounds them. Every serious-minded teacher can make that effort, and, in so doing, can affect the nature of the practice and how its tradition will influence those who come after. The sense of tradition points the way to thoughtful continuity and change between past, present, and future.

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1. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

2. According to Oakeshott, socialization constitutes "an apprenticeship to adult life…governed by an extrinsic purpose"; Michael Oakeshott, "Education: The Engagement and its Frustration," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 84. In this essay I will suggest that teaching takes its identity from its intrinsic aims and character as a practice. The sense of tradition fosters a noninstrumental view of the work.

3. Roy A. Rappaport, "Ritual, Sanctity, and Cybernetics," *American Anthropologist* 73 (1971): 69.

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1984).

5. Ibid., 188-96.

6. Peter J. Arnold, *Sport, Ethics, and Education* (London: Cassell, 1997); Miriam Ben-Peretz, *Learning from Experience: Memory and the Teacher's Account of Teaching* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995); Margret Buchmann, "The Careful Vision: How Practical is Contemplation in Teaching?" *American Journal of Education* 98 (1989): 35-61; David T. Hansen, *The Call to Teach* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995); "The Moral is in the Practice," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 14 (1998): 643-55; Karl D. Hostetler, *Ethical Judgment in Teaching* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997); John Olson, *Understanding Teaching: Beyond Expertise* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1992); and Max van Manen, *The Tact of Teaching: The Meaning of Pedagogical Thoughtfulness* (Albany: SUNY, 1991).

7. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 32.

8. Ibid., 32.

9. Ibid., 18.

10. Ibid., 16.

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11. Ibid., 18. Bloom applauds the efforts of what he calls "strong poets" to elide tradition, but he also emphasizes the artifice of such a move.

12. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991).

13. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d ed. (New York: Continuum, 1996).

14. For useful background analysis, see, for example, Deborah Kerdeman, "Hermeneutics and Education: Understanding, Control, and Agency," *Educational Theory* 48, no. 2 (1998): 267-78; Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); and Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).

15. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.

16. See especially Taylor, *Sources of the Self.*

17. Michael Oakeshott, "Learning and Teaching," in Fuller, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, 43-62.

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