The Pedagogy of The Interhuman

Alexander M. Sidorkin
University of Washington

In "The Plague," Albert Camus portrays a camp for people who had to be isolated from the rest of the plague-stricken town.

> But worst of all is that they are forgotten, and they know it. Their friends have forgotten them because they have other things to think about, naturally enough. And those they love have forgotten them because all their energies are devoted to making schemes and taking steps to get them out of the camp. And by dint of always thinking about these schemes and steps they have ceased thinking about those whose release they're trying to secure. And that, too, is natural enough.[1]

This strikes me as a metaphor describing an educational institution. We as people, and each of us individually, love our children and see that something should be done to help their lives to flourish. But all we do is create "schemes and steps" instead of relating to the children directly. The direct relations can fulfill our wish to help children without distortions that "schemes and steps" bring. Should educational change be all about implementing policies, devising curriculum, and introducing programs?

The century that is about to end witnessed an unprecedented celebration of social science. And yet even the most sophisticated social or psychological account of human being actually puts something between us, makes our relations rather roundabout. A lot of people believe that this is normal, that there are no relations without some kind of medium, or a middle link that is largely responsible for what is happening among us. Thus, we relate to our children through institutions and policies. And if this is so, the only way to achieve educational change is more money, new legislation, better policies and innovative programs. This paper is intended to show that we can and should relate to our children directly, and what such direct relations mean.

Perhaps Martin Buber expressed the idea of direct relations with clarity. He wrote about two essentially different areas or dimensions of human life, the social and the interhuman. Social phenomena exists, in his words, "whenever the life of a number of men, lived with one another, bound up together, brings in its train shared experiences and reactions."[2] But it does not mean that between one member and another there exists any kind of personal or existential relation. In the interhuman "the only thing that matters is that for each of the two men the other happens as the particular other, that each becomes aware of the other and is thus related to him in such a way that he doesn't regard him and use him as his object, but as his partner in a living event."[3] Another important characteristic of the interhuman is that it does not include psychological and social structures, or, as Buber calls them, "lasting dispositions." By the sphere of interhuman he means "solely actual happenings between men, whether wholly mutual or tending to grow into mutual relations."[4] The interhuman consists of elements of everyday life that may lead to a genuine dialogue, or, as Buber describes it, "I -- Thou" relation. But the interhuman is not an "I --Thou" yet, it just opens some way to that direction.

Buber insists that the interhuman phenomena may not be understood as a psychological one. Haim Gordon, who uses the Buberian ideas in an attempt to promote trust and understanding between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East, illustrates this point well:

Haim: Dialogue, as Buber taught it, is not identifying with the Other, but rather accepting him as Other while often rejecting his feeling or thoughts. I attempted to relate dialogically to Muhammed.

Muhammed: I didn't feel that you related to me dialogically.

Haim (forcefully): Muhammed, please stop listening to your feelings and try to listen to me, to Haim who is sitting here facing you. Please, listen carefully and try to believe me. I *am* interested in your feeling, but only as part of your entire way of life and not as a main topic for discussion.[5]

It took me a while to understand this concept of "listen to me, and not to your feelings." We often assume that our feelings are an indispensable medium of a discourse. Psychologists have convinced us that what we feel is what we are, and what the other says s/he feels is what s/he is. We try to relate to each other through our feelings, as an alternative to relating through social roles. In fact, it is a trade-off, as Russians say, "an awl for a soap-bar" -- one petty thing for another. We substitute one indirect relation for another. Our feelings might get in the way of a direct relation as easily as an objectified social role.

In *The Therapy of Desire*[6] Martha Nussbaum examines Hellenistic philosophy. One of the most important accomplishments of main Hellenistic schools was a theory of emotions. All of these schools, to varying degrees, had suggested that the passions cannot be trusted. To simplify the argument greatly, Hellenistic philosophy claimed that not only such emotions as fear and anger, but also love and grief, are sources of evil, if not limited and controlled in, or extirpated from, as Stoics thought, human life. Cautioning against attachment, they nevertheless had developed a therapeutic kind of philosophy that implies a very particular, well-tuned connection between the philosopher and pupil. Perhaps such a connection between people that journeys beyond both reason and emotion is in line with the Buberian notion of the interhuman.

While Buber does not really specify a content of the interhuman, it is quite clear that we communicate there neither our particular beliefs nor feelings. The interhuman is a connection of whole beings. A *recognition* seems to be the word that describes more fully the content of the interhuman. Similarly to Buber's concept, Jessica Benjamin builds her reinterpretation of psychoanalysis on what she calls *the intersubjective*. She asserts that a necessary tension between self-assertion and mutual recognition is of crucial importance for development of self. If this tension breaks one way or another, domination begins.[7] (For the purpose of this discussion I will pick just one aspect of Benjamin's theory, recognition and mutuality). Recognition, she writes is reflexive; "it includes not only the other's confirming response, but also how we find ourselves in that response. We recognize ourselves in the other."[8]

If we are to add the idea of mutual recognition to Buber's concept, we then have to realize that one enters the realm of the interhuman not only giving oneself fully, and not only recognizing the other as s/he is, but also learning who indeed one is. From this suggestion I will draw one small but important inference for my argument: If we learn from, or perhaps, through, others who we really are, we may get different pictures of ourselves through different people. Multiplicity of dialogues is a basic fact of human life. "*The thinking human consciousness and the dialogical sphere of that consciousness's existence* in all their depth and specificity are inaccessible to the monological artistic approach," wrote M. Bakhtin.[9] He also has shown that the *polyphony* of a novel reflects the polyphony of our existence. The dyads, the pairs, are very prominent players on the pages of philosophical books, which is quite convenient for analysis, but has not much to do with real life. The dyadic relation is a pure abstraction. Even if there are only two human beings physically present in a relation, each of them suggests multiple reflections of the self in relation to a multitude of others. We take the baggage of our social life and previous personal relations with us into every interhuman encounter. And this baggage *is* us.

Buber, as I understand him, implies some kind of a "hard core," or "true self" in a human being. That is a genuine authentic self which is usually buried under the cocoon of distorting little voices

coming not from inside, but from elsewhere. One must strip the hard core of the cocoon in order to relate to somebody else directly. I doubt such a hard core existence. Those outer voices are organic parts of the self as an internal narrative. The self is full of contradictions, inconsistancies, and foreign materials.

Besides the things in which we believe, our very identity is a product of a continuing conversation with a group of "significant others" as Charles Taylor argues. The identity, in his opinion, is formed by people we love. "People do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own. Rather, we are introduced to them through interaction with others who matter to us."[10] But even later in life the significant others keep forming our identity because they are included in our personal life experiences. "If some of the things I value most are accessible to me only in relation to the person I love, then she becomes part of my identity."[11]

The same theme of misunderstood "true self" is common in psychological literature on self and identity development. For instance, Susan Harter, investigating the identity development of adolescents, asserts that the self is a social construction. "In Search of Self" defines a major drama that unfolds on center stage during adolescence with a complicated cast of characters who do not always speak with a single voice.[12] Interestingly enough, Harter also states that "a major theme in the literature on the adult self is the need to integrate one's multiple attributes into a theory of self or personality that is coherent and unified."[13] She approvingly quotes another researcher who argues that the self-theory, like any formal scientific theory, must meet certain criteria, one of which is *internal consistency*.[14] But such a trend in psychological research leads us to a mistake. The self-concept is not a scientific theory, at least not a positivistic one, and shouldn't be like it. It is, rather, an unfinished novel, or a series of novels. Any novel includes contradictory voices that all together form some kind of a whole, but not a logically consistent whole.

The internal consistency is not only a false concept, it also may lead to destroying our dialogical potential. Buber thinks that seeming versus being is the essential problem of the interhuman. It is efforts to *seem* that prevent us from entering the interhuman. I am inclined to believe that a search of our "consistent, true selves" is likely to lead us to the path of seeming. I have not always believed this. Up to a certain point in my life, I thought that there was a deficiency in my own judgment. I could relate to two completely opposite opinions and almost agree with both. I could talk to two mortal enemies blaming each other at different times, and feel solidarity with both. I believed it happened due to the lack of my personal integrity and overabundance of conformity. Not that it bothered me much, but I wondered. Then it came to my attention that no novelist can credit himself or herself with much integrity either. Even if an author's voice can be carefully separated from the voices of characters, it is always contradictory. For example, in *Red Wheel* A. I. Solzhenitsyn portrays the Russian Czar, the government, and various wings of the revolutionaries critically, but also with compassion and understanding. Otherwise the novel just could not happen. I was not alone in my inconsistency, and that was good news. The bad news was that as I remembered, every time in the past that I have tried to pull together my integrity, to formulate a creed, to finalize my beliefs, it was a laughable effort of seeming, not being. After that discovery, I learned how not to have an opinion, and to agree shamelessly with disagreeable things. I have also come to see that all of those people with whom I carelessly reached an understanding do not go away, and keep existing within my head.

Clearly, the dyadic nature of the interhuman relation is prone to being misunderstood. Every direct encounter, in fact, is populated with many other people and relations that individuals bear in them. It is a gathering of people that relate through particular individuals in the realm of the interhuman. Every significant other you bring into the relation has a flock of other significant others behind her back. In the interhuman we communicate to the throng of different people, dead and alive, and ultimately, to the entire world of human beings in its spirituality.

Not only in complexity of the self does the interhuman become more than a two person affair. The interhuman is an inclusive relation. It starts, of course, as an exclusive one in the sense that every special relation implies choosing this particular partner, and therefore not choosing or excluding the others. All of friendship and love is exclusive in this sense. The exclusiveness is just the other side of intimacy. I think Buber had in mind this kind of exclusiveness when he insisted that the interhuman occurs between two people. And yet, paradoxically enough it is also inclusive, and may not be any other way. What do you do if in the very moment of the "actual happening" of the interhuman relation, someone else comes along and knocks at the door of your mutual awareness? It is time for philosophy to enlarge the problem of the Self and the Other, to introduce the Third into a conversation. But what do you do? Do you open the door at risk of ruining the intimacy of the interhuman encounter? Or do you leave the door locked and ignore the plea? In this latter case, I believe, you violate the trust.

Generally, I trust you not because of you. I do not check if you deserve to be trusted, since it would not be a trust, but a suspicion. There is no trust without risk of betrayal. The trust is an embracing of a risk. The trust is my trust; it is a state of my mind rather than the property of our relationship. The trust begins *before* the relationship occurs. And since the trust resides in me, I cannot deny it to anyone. Trusting one person involves the risk of trusting anybody, everyone. If I trust, there is no door any more, and s/he who wants to enter will. If you think about it, an exclusive trust is an oxymoron.

An exclusive interhuman relation is also impossible. The Third, the botherer, the intruder, is always there about to ruin our fragile contact. And yet we cannot say "no" to him without destroying what is between us. The interhuman is attractive; more than that, it is vital, and people around recognize it. Can we have a feast behind shut doors in the midst of a starving country? The interhuman is bound to spread. In this sense the direct and holistic interhuman relation is inclusive, so it tends to spill from the *between* to the *among*.

The interhuman has the potential to move beyond a dyad, towards a group. And groups are what we deal with in the field of education. A group of kids is the most fundamental fact of schooling. The very idea of a school, even among other social animals, reflects a particular form of division of labor. Since each adult cannot take care of his or her own child, there will be one adult who takes care of many children at the same time. Thus, the group of children with one adult is the basic paradigm of schooling.

Buber dislikes groups. He admits that sometimes, especially in the life of smaller groups, there do arise "contacts which frequently favor the birth of individual relations."[15]

> But in general it must be said that the leading elements in groups, especially in the later course of human history, have rather been inclined to suppress the personal relation in favor of the purely collective element. Where this latter element reigns alone or is predominant, men feel themselves to be carried by the collectivity, which lifts them out of loneliness and fear of the world and lostness. When this happens --and for modern man it is an essential happening -- the life between person and person seems to retreat more and more before the advance of the collective. The collective aims at holding in check the inclination to personal life. It is as though those who are bound together in groups should in the main be concerned only with the work of the group and should turn to the personal partners who are tolerated by the group only in secondary meetings.[16]

Buber is right, most of the groups most of the time probably do suppress an individual relation. But a group might become a nurturing community, *a special kind of group that is not hostile to, but inviting of the interhuman*.

As we can see, Buber states that the interhuman encounter happens within the group only as a *secondary* meeting, while the work of the group is the main concern. A nurturing community is the group where this hierarchy is reversed. It is a group where the interhuman is the primary concern,

and what the group actually *does* together moves into a subordinated position. I will use one of the Russian theories of the educational collective to illustrate the idea.

L. I. Novikova and her group started their research of the best K-10 schools in the Soviet Union in the 1960s.[17] The research continues now within a new framework of the "educational systems theory." They were trying to understand the nature of the collectives that constitute such schools. Among other things they discovered that the effective educational collective may be described both as an organization and as a community.[18] Neither of the two descriptions can be reduced to the other. And in reality, each collective led two intermingled and intimately interdependent, but still distinctive lives. A school functions as a school, with its policies, schedules, rules and roles; at the same time some subtle network of interpersonal relations strives, constituting very elusive, but real phenomena. I will assert that some collectives have an *interhuman* dimension, that is a thick layer (using Buberian language), of "actual happenings" where people regard each other, not as objects, but as "partners in a living event."

Another discovery was that successful collectives were not monoliths, but rather loose conglomerates of differentiated smaller groups with intersecting memberships. These "best schools" invariably provided the students with a broad variety of organized and spontaneous activities which constantly shifted and reshaped the organizational and communal structures. It seemed the very variety of personal involvements guarded the collective from becoming too rigid and authoritarian. It is interesting to mention that, as Robert Putnam reports, "strong" personal ties (like kinship and intimate friendship) are less important than "weak ties" (like acquaintanceship and shared membership in secondary associations) in sustaining community cohesion and collective action.[19] On this point Buber was wrong; it is loose, non-dominating groups that can best defend us against the loneliness and the fear of the world. Precisely because such groups are not based on strong ties, they do not suppress the stronger attachments like friendship and love when such spontaneously arise.

The main paradox of the interhuman is that we cannot just get together to relate to each other. As Buber noticed, we must instead become partners in a living event. Consequently, the event must be present first. But ironically, almost any event of our social life is so challenging that we have to band together in a rigid group in order to cooperate in coping with the challenge. We cannot relate without some reason, and the reason makes us unable to communicate. We come together to work, and the demands of work cast us in a work institution. We gather in a school, and schooling lays its heavy hand on our ability to see each other as humans. Even having fun, if taken as a goal, handicaps true dialogue. Yet when we try *just* to build a relation, it reeks of falsehood and boredom. Now, in nurturing communities people get together *as if* they wanted to work, or to solve some problem. In reality they are looking for an excuse to be together, to experience the interhuman.

We educators, teachers, and parents take the job of upbringing too seriously. Schooling should, in reality, just be an excuse for human beings to get together. What we really should do is to give ourselves fully to the children, to catch that simple moment of direct encounter with a child, and just hold on there. As I mentioned, the curious Third will soon be knocking at our door, and we will let her in. If we do it persistently enough, we will discover that our multi-voiced selves start resonating. It happens because we will have some common people and shared events in that flock of ghosts we bring into a conversation. We will develop a community that does not limit our freedom more than we want to allow.

Perhaps the last paragraph sounds too frivolous. The nurture of our children *is* a serious matter. Let us consider, for example, the circumstances, described by McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman in *Urban sanctuaries*. They portray six successful neighborhood organizations for youth operating in different inner-city areas. I believe, these organizations are, in fact, nurturing communities -- ones that have the interhuman dimension. Some elaboration based on the book might add some meat to my argument.

The authors "found no single focus, strategy or organizational type associated with success -- no cookie cutter for policy. For each success, we can point to an apparently identical activity that inner-city youth scorned to attend."[20] "Wizards," as the adult leaders of those organizations are referred to in the book, do not actually concentrate on programs and activities. They choose for an activity whatever they are personally passionate about, but above all, they listen to youth, to what kids themselves have to say. To be sure, "wizards" offer real responsibilities, and clear rules and discipline. This might appear contrary to my hypothesis about the reversed hierarchy of goals in the nurturing community, but it is not. The activity is important, but an opportunity to belong to a community that respects the individual is more important. In such a community things actually happen because life there is not channeled into rigid models and false assumptions. As suggested by Novikova's findings, all successful youth organizations have multiple functions. They are "full-service youth organizations" where kids not only engage in primary activity (sports, learning, community service, drama etc.), but also hang out, have fun, get a advice on all aspects of life, and have an audience.

Urban Sanctuaries is not only about neighborhood organizations. Although its authors repeatedly report that the inner-city youth and schools reject one another, I still believe that the nurturing community may be built in regular school. It can be done if certain conditions hold. A school should be hand-made on the spot rather than manufactured *en mass*. A school must be given a chance to develop, to have its own history, and not be pre-modeled. The Buberian living events should happen in due course. The learning, although important and serious, still has its place subordinated below the highest goal of the interhuman encounter. School should be much more than just school; it should provide a place and occasion for children and adults to meet in a variety of roles so that none of them sticks to a person as a label. Teachers should invest their sleves into the school. Their professional skills are pertinent, but secondary. There should be a sense of community.

The true community is not a utopia; it is always full of jerks who never get it; full of rebels who never agree; and full of lazy-bones who never do anything. Yet the jerks, the rebels, and the lazy-bones, along with the rest of us nice people are all accepted. They are reproved, but tolerated; confronted, but loved. So, we will build this kind of community, and do the good job pretending that we are here to learn and to teach. We will still call it "a school."

1. Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 240.

2. Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1988), 63.

3. Ibid., 64.

4. Ibid., 65.

5. Haim Gordon, *Dance, Dialogue, and Despair* (The University of Alabama Press, 1986), 9.

6. Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

7. Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 12.

8. Ibid., 21

9. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Ardis, 1973), 228.

10. Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 32.

11. Ibid., 34.

12. Susan Harter, "Self and Identity Development," in *At the Threshold,* ed. S. Shirley Feldman and Glen R. Elliott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 353.

13. Ibid., 357

14. S. Epstein, "The Self-concept Revisited, or a Theory of a Theory," *American Psychologist*, 28 (1973): 405-16.

15. Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, 63.

16. Ibid.

17. Ludmila I. Novikova, *Pedagogika Detskogo Kollektiva*. *Voprosy Teorii*. [The Pedagogy of the Children's Collective: Questions of the Theory] (Moscow: Znanie, 1978).

18. The notion actually used was "a socio-psychological unity," which does not sound right being literally translated. Frankly, it does not sound right even in Russian. I rename it, hoping to save the content.

19. Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 175.

20. M. W. McLaughlin, M. A. Irby, and J. Langman, *Urban Sanctuaries: Neighborhood Organizations in the Lives and Futures of Inner-city Youth*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994), 9.