

The Value of the Arts for Special Populations

by Mike Arons

I feel a special kinship to this subject, Arts and Special Populations. So this is not just another talk for me. Because the subject speaks to the core of my personal experience, I want to refer to that core. So I will ask you to tolerate some of my autobiography. Because of some of these personal experiences I find myself more than moderately upset by the current crusade to restore as the ground of education reading, writing, and arithmetic - or what are worshiped as the basics. I most certainly question that these are the basics of education, though I feel they are justly valued as one set of means towards understanding and full human development, which are what I do consider to be the basics of education. I do not think that the arts are the basic of education. But because of their nature they may in some ways provide better means to certain understanding and fulfillment than the three "R's."

Special populations, as I am going to see these, are those which need or can benefit from something prior to, complimentary with, in place of, or beyond the written word. The arts, of course, include that which depends on the written word - poetry, prose, theatre, and so forth. But when we speak of these arts we are not speaking of acquisition of language skills, as so many see as the prime function of education today. We see in the arts a spiritual uplift, a spacing out of consciousness, a touch at the jugular of humanness.

We do not know whether the students of Socrates - indeed, whether the master himself - could read or write. More essential towards understanding than the literary skills, to Socrates, was personal sensitivity. According to Paul Goodman, the prospective student's ability to blush served Socrates as an entrance tool rather than some ancient counterpart of the S.A.T., the G.R.E., or the Clep. Though he was certainly speaking of a quite different kind of understanding, Marshall McLuhan, who saw the historical limits of the written word, was in certain agreement with Socrates and did indeed help to prepare the ground during the 1960s for this conference. The psychedelic drug experience of the 1960s, Ecological Consciousness - indeed New Consciousness with its emphasis on self-realization, Transpersonal Psychology, and transcendent thinking of East and West - speaks to domains of potential human experience which are not denied to the illiterate, nor guaranteed to the literate.

I have had some rather unusual educational experiences, and I would like to share some of these with you. I was functionally illiterate at the time I left high school and even when I entered college at age 27. My college entrance examination scores were well at the bottom, not only in the verbal areas but in every other area. These corresponded to my I.Q. scores, which on standardized forms never got above 70. I had spent the last few years of high school in a special class for the slow learner. Before that I had been sent to military school under the assumption that my school problems could be cured by discipline. Even before that, I had been placed in a general curriculum - centered around shop class - evidently based on the belief that students unable to succeed academically are only suited for manual labor. In fact, I failed as badly at military school and in shop as I had in the normal classroom.

I shall not stop here to speak of how I got into college ten years beyond the usual time. I would like rather to speak to the question of "How could a person who was unable to read or write at better than a third grade level manage to get through undergraduate school and then complete graduate studies and write a doctoral thesis in a foreign country and language?" It is not easy. But for reasons other than what one may imagine. What was required was the ability to translate understanding into language. Most of us "well-educated" understand only through language. Brahms put what I am about to say well. A music critic from the newspaper asked him to play his new composition. "It is fine," commented the critic, "But what are you trying to say in that music?" "Oh," exclaimed Brahms, "You didn't understand?" So he played the music again. I believe that that great master of the English language, Winston Churchill, was also saying something close to what I am about to say when as a child he handed in a blank sheet as his entrance exam to Harrow. "What does this mean?" cried the Headmaster. "Sir," explained Churchill, "You asked me what you wanted to know, but you did not ask me what I knew." In both cases there was a resistance to use the language inappropriately. In the case of Brahms, he was suggesting that whatever was being said was better expressed in music - discursive language would reduce or deform the reality. In the case of Churchill, he was saying that language was a part of him - like his sweat, his thoughts. Attempts to design language to express where he was were fine but that he could not use it to express that which was alien to him. Premature use of language is also inappropriate. We have all felt at times that in some way we wear long trousers before we grow into them. We listen to children who have acquired language skills but hear nothing of them through these, or when they grow up we hear a relatively good use of language but to express only common ideas. My own school experiences were the reverse of this. I could understand no language until I could first understand existentially what was being said. Then I would have to struggle to put this understanding into a conventional form. So in college I would read rather difficult texts - Plato, Hegel, Swift, Dostoevsky - and not really understand more than a few words in a paragraph. It would sometimes take me days to get through a few pages, and even then I could not pass a reading test on what I had read. Since I could not understand the words which were alien to me, I had to understand the person who wrote these - enter his or her world by discovering it already there in myself. This I would do through a self-evolved form of meditation. Once I understood the frame of reference - the world of truth from within which the author was coming - the rest would follow, slowly at first, and then in a lightening array of insights the language would become clear: what it meant, why the author chose this way, rather than that, of putting it, the feel of the language, the images the author was grasping for, and, yes, the limits to language itself. For I could then understand far more than what the author could possibly have written on the subject. I was in the creative world, a creative soul among creative souls.

I can offer a specific example to you which serves not only to indicate how I came to understand writers whose words I could not initially read but also point to what I was doing in those classes in elementary and high school while others were learning reading, writing, math, history, and so forth. When I was around eleven, a social studies class discussion had turned to the subject of slave trade in the South. The teacher, and the class, quickly moved on, but I found myself fixed on a "fantasy" - which through doodling enumerable variations of the theme kept me preoccupied for months. This is its essence: A man purchased a slave. The slave worked the fields and,

hence, developed stronger muscles. The master could relax and he ate and got softer and fatter. As he did less for himself he required more from his slave until the point when the slave could no longer stand the burden and thought of what before had been unthinkable - revolt. By this time the soft master was vulnerable as he had not been when he purchased the slave and the revolt succeeded.

When we read Hegel in philosophy I quickly recognized this simple but essential paradigm of the Hegelian dialectic. I understood the dialectic with no trouble and could easily think within that framework.

The next thing that I am going to say about this particular example is more important than the observation of how I had already dwelt on an Hegelian paradigm at age eleven. Having recognized this paradigm of Hegel, I entered into his world, but also the entire world of philosophy. In that world, I recognized in myself Plato, Spinoza, Descartes, Kant, and Husserl. Certainly I did not recognize elaborate philosophies, but the frame of reference within which their thinking made sense. Likewise, I was able to enter the world of poets - Keats, and Yeats and Auden and Dryden and Emerson - they were not speaking to me through some language. They were speaking with me and I could understand and admire the language they chose but could also recognize some limitations - as we in psychology recognize the limits of Freud today - while all the time admiring his brilliant treatise.

Indeed, the real talent or skill of the genius is to give form - through language or art or whatever - to the insight. The insight - that, I believe, is our birthright. Alas, our education makes us stand on the other end of language - assuming language to be the only vehicle through which insight can be gained - and in this belief, I feel, it actually creates a wall of separation between many children and the insights. They are asked to master the language forms before they are asked to get in touch with what may be understood by more appropriate means. The illiterate is not barred from the gates of heaven. Joan of Arc was not barred from her visions by illiteracy.

What of art, then? In our current technological-scientific frame of reference, art is pre-scientific. For Auguste Comte and the Positivism he fathered, the human mind in its progressive reach for clarity and objectivity outgrows the artistic consciousness - just as the artistic consciousness was an outgrowth of religion and myth. We find in both Freud and Piaget psychological versions of this progressive development from the subjective towards the objective - from the irrational instinctual drives to ego control, from games of fantasy to games of logic and rules. By laying out reality - historical or psychological - as linearly progressive, art (as expression of the subjective), becomes merely a pastime of the modern age. The serious and important mission is now in the scientific. The language itself is learned scientifically, objectively. But is linearity the best or only way of conceiving of human progress? Or is the metaphor of linear progress merely a product of our current technological mind?

In technology we do clearly distinguish stages of progress by indicating by clear criteria that the latest model is an improvement over an antecedent one. TX-2 is better than TX-1 because of longer wing-span, greater speed, increased maneuverability, etc. But what of Art? Can we say that Impressionism is an improvement over Flemish art and that this is an improvement over Cave Drawing? Surely in the case of art the same statements as in technology do not hold. We can say only that Impressionism is different from the art of the Flemish masters. Yet does this mean that we cannot speak of progress in the arts? Not only can the arts progress technically,

but each new form of art opens our consciousness to the universe in a different way. Art expands our awareness without one form superceding and rendering obsolete the previous ones.

So there does exist a form of progress which is not linear. Indeed, modern phenomenology and much Oriental philosophy is based on a voyage through and around consciousness which moves always back towards its source. We can put this differently and speak of spacing-out of consciousness. By contrast, much of our modern emphasis is on thinking which is convergent – outgrowing, as we said, the subjective in ourselves and hastening to scrap that which is obsolete in the world of objects as we stretch towards the correct. But what is the most correct part of a painting? Surely the background is not to be scrapped because our eyes more easily fix on the foreground. There is no foreground without a background. In music, is it the purpose of the conductor to arrive with the greatest speed possible at the end of the composition? Art - as painting, music, or metaphor - does not, in the subject, render everything obsolete save the intelligence. We are called upon as a whole in art, just as the object calls us to its whole being. And yet art is not without its criteria of correctness. If there is a point at which our consciousness smiles and locks in it art, it is there where the human soul feels right – heightened - as we are pulled beyond the immediate to the universal, beyond ourselves to an experience shareable with others in our space.

Nothing is left the same - our senses, our feelings, or our intelligence - each has grown by the feast. We are deepened and prepared for insights at another level. So the archetype or Gestalt form is not a once-for-all experience, but we are prepared by each to encounter another level of correctness. For instance, as children we may share the insight in Gulliver's Travels of little and big men. Although the book has not changed over the years, at 21 we are disposed to discover more through and beyond the initial insight. Indeed, at best, we come to see ourselves as a work of art - recognizing our common stages of passage through life. Bergson likens consciousness to a musical composition. We recognize at some point the threads of our theme of life, through the variations, and choose then to play out our symphony as fully as possible. We choose to be what we are - a convergence of creativity and discovery, choice and destiny. In speaking of those who potentially have these experiences, are we really speaking of a small and special population, an elite group? Perhaps. Yet consider that the archetypes of Jung are characterized by their universality - as are the forms of Plato and those of the Gestaltists - not reserved for special groups, but for all of us. The Master-Slave relationship of Hegel is archetypal. If these universal forms are inaccessible to most in our modern education factories, we must then see its human products as the special population which is out of touch with that which is inherently human - even if this group constitutes the large majority of us. I wonder sometimes at the way we handle those whom we do call our special populations - among them the behavior disorders, the dyslexics, the autistic, the retarded, and a variety of racial and ethnic groups. From our lofty perch in modern reason, we assume that if these persons cannot function adaptively they most certainly cannot operate at the so-called higher human planes. Note how we make these planes of universal understanding special. We are charged with using on them special methods (special education) towards the sole aim of functional adaptation. Even the arts - music, dance, play, and paint - are used instrumentally, as

means to get the pill of functional adaptability down the child's gullet, not for their own sake. We rarely stretch our own search to find the artist in the child.

Nine years ago a young black student was sent to me by the college reading clinic. The girl, a Freshman, could neither read nor write and it was certain she could not remain in school. She was sent to psychology because we had a class called Personal Relationships which primarily involved group encounters and discussion rather than reading or papers. I tested the young lady myself and found, indeed, that she could only make out a few words in every paragraph. Her writing was poorer than her reading. She spent the quarter in the Personal Relationships class and it became evident that her own insights ran deeper than those of the other students. She saw well beyond the tangible details to the hidden obvious. She was encouraged to express herself in art during the class. The next year she joined the art department, and I have here two paintings she exhibited at the end of the year. She received a scholarship to an art school in Nova Scotia. I have not seen her since. She is one of those people, however, that I have always known very well.