DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 963 SO 022 849

AUTHOR Buchmann, Margret
TITLE The Practicality of Contemplative Attention: Devoted Thought That Is Not Deluded. Occasional Paper No. 141.
INSTITUTION Michigan State Univ., East Lansing. Inst. for Research on Teaching.
SPONS AGENCY Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Jun 92
NOTE 27p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Processes; Elementary Secondary Education; *Professional Development; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Characteristics; Teacher Effectiveness; Teacher Improvement; Teacher Influence; *Thinking Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Contemplation; Reflective Practice; Reflective Teaching; *Reflective Thinking

ABSTRACT

By exploring the question of whether teaching begins and ends in contemplative thought, this essay suggests that conceptions of teacher thinking must be expanded beyond planning and decision making. People's ordinary conception of thinking includes imagining, remembering, interpreting, and caring. In order to understand the full scope and meaning of teachers' thoughts, researchers and teacher educators need to broaden and diversify their ideas of thinking. Contemplation is a process of thinking that although remote from action and utility, directs and supports the comprehensive practical life. Describing contemplation as devoted thought that is not deluded, the essay examines subject matter and children as objects of teachers' contemplative concern. The argument for the practicality of contemplation derives from a concept of practice going beyond what an individual teacher does or what typically can be observed in schools. The collective moral concept of contemplation invokes intrinsic ends and ideas of perfection so that constitutive fidelities of teaching made available in contemplation further teachers' professional development. Contains 15 references. (Author/CK)

Occasional Paper No. 141

THE PRACTICALITY OF CONTEMPLATIVE ATTENTION: DEVOTED THOUGHT THAT IS NOT DELUDED

Margret Buchmann

Occasional Paper No. 141

THE PRACTICALITY OF CONTEMPLATIVE ATTENTION: DEVOTED THOUGHT THAT IS NOT DELUDED

Margret Buchmann

Published by

The Institute for Research on Teaching
College of Education
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan 48824-1034

June 1992

This work is sponsored in part by the Institute for Research on Teaching, College of Education, Michigan State University. The Institute for Research on Teaching is funded from a variety of federal, state, and private sources including the United States Department of Education and Michigan State University. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position, policy, or endorsement of the funding agencies.

Institute for Research on Teaching

The **Institute for Research on Teaching** was founded in 1976 at Michigan State University and has been the recipient of major federal grants. Funding for IRT projects is currently received from the U.S. Department of Education, Michigan State University, and other agencies and foundations. IRT scholars have conducted major research projects aimed at improving classroom teaching, including studies of classroom management strategies, student socialization, the diagnosis and remediation of reading difficulties, and school policies. IRT researchers have also been examining the teaching of specific school subjects such as reading, writing, general mathematics, and science and are seeking to understand how factors inside as well as outside the classroom affect teachers. In addition to curriculum and instructional specialists in school subjects, researchers from such diverse disciplines as educational psychology, anthropology, sociology, history, economics, and philosophy cooperate in conducting IRT research. By focusing on how teachers respond to enduring problems of practice and by collaborating with practitioners, IRT researchers strive to produce new understandings to improve teaching and teacher education.

Currently, IRT researchers are engaged in a number of programmatic efforts in research on teaching that build on past work and extend the study of teaching in new directions such as the teaching of subject matter disciplines in elementary school, teaching in developing countries, and teaching special populations. New modes of teacher collaboration with schools and teachers' organizations are also being explored. The Center for the Learning and Teaching of Elementary Subjects, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement from 1987-92, is one of the IRT's major endeavors and emphasizes the teaching of elementary mathematics, science, social studies, literature, and the arts for understanding, appreciation, and use. The focus is on what content should be taught, how teachers concentrate their teaching to use their limited resources in the best way, and in what ways good teaching is subject-matter specific.

The IRT publishes research reports, occasional papers, conference proceedings, the Elementary Subjects Center Series, a newsletter for practitioners (IRT Communication Quarterly), and lists and catalogs of IRT publications. For more information, to receive a list or catalog, and/or to be placed on the IRT mailing list to receive the newsletter, please write to the Editor, Institute for Research on Teaching, 252 Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824-1034.

Abstract

Does teaching begin and end in contemplative thought? In exploring this question, this essay suggests that conceptions of teacher thinking must be expanded beyond planning and decision making. People's ordinary conception of thinking includes imagining, remembering, interpreting, and caring. Hence, to understand the full scope and meaning of teachers' thoughts, researchers and teacher educators have to broaden and diversify their ideas. Contemplation is a process of thinking that, though remote from action and utility, directs and supports the comprehensive practical life. Describing contemplation as devoted thought that is not deluded, the author exar nes subject matter and children as objects of teachers' contemplative concern. Her argument for the practicality of contemplation is based on a concept of practice going beyond what an individual teacher does or what can by typically observed in schools. This collective, moral concept invokes intrinsic ends and ideas of perfection: constitutive fidelities of teaching that, made available in contemplation, further teachers' professional development.

THE PRACTICALITY OF CONTEMPLATIVE ATTENTION: DEVOTED THOUGHT THAT IS NOT DELUDED[1]

Margret Buchmann[2]

> The painter's vision is not a lens,
> it trembles to caress the light.
> . . . . . .
> Yet why not say what happened?
> Pray for the grace of accuracy
> Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination
> stealing like the tide across a map
> to his girl solid with yearning.
> Robert Lowell (1977), "Epilogue," p. 127

To speak of contemplation and practicality in one breath is to be guilty of a contradiction in terms, or so it seems. Practicality is associated with usefulness and action, while the careful vision of contemplation suspends wanting and doing in favor of a wonderstruck beholding. What, then, makes contemplation desirable in teaching and what might such thinking require? How can its receptive stance be for the sake of practice? What should teachers contemplate? To address such questions, there has to be some understanding of practice and of a contemplation as a kind of thinking defined by many negations: absences, oppositions, surrenders, or repudiations.

Contemplation is "non-utilitarian, non-volitional, non-emotional, non-analytical . . ., an act of unselfish almost impersonal concentration" (Haezrahi, 1956, p. 36). Schopenhauer (1844/1956) similarly argues that conditions for coming to know exist if a person relinquishes

> the common way of looking at things, gives up tracing . . . their relations to each other, the final goal of which is always a relation to his own will; if he thus ceases to consider the where, the when, the why, and the whither of things, and looks simply and solely at the what; if, further, he does not allow abstract

---

[1]This paper will be a chapter in the forthcoming book Detachment and Concern: Topics in the Philosophy of Teaching and Teacher Education, written by Margret Buchmann and Robert E. Floden (New York: Teachers College Press).

[2]Margret Buchmann, professor of teacher education at Michigan State University, is coordinator of the Conceptual Analysis of Teaching Project.

> thought, the concepts of the reason, to take possession of his consciousness, but, instead of all this, gives the whole power of his mind to perception, sinks himself entirely in this and lets his whole consciousness be filled with the quiet contemplation of the . . . object actually present, . . . whatever it may be. (p. 147)

A common way of looking at teacher thinking is to regard it as planning or decision making, based, at its best, on research and scholarship. Yet people think about a great many things they can never know, and--in its search for meaning--the need to think is different from the need to act. To perceive teacher thinking rather than preconceive it, we need to look at some contexts in which people talk about thinking. To get clearer about the practicality of any kind of thinking, we must consider the concept of practice. I will show, then, how the moral discipline of quietly receptive attention expands notions of valuable thinking in teaching as one of the helping professions, while indicating an answer to the question of what more busy and controlling processes of thought may themselves refer to for support and guidance.

When Do We Talk About Thinking?

One might stand before a 17th-century Dutch painting, thinking, "The young woman sits at a table, pen in hand, gorgeous in her yellow jacket; a servant, waiting to carry her letter, smiles rather slyly: Her mistress is wrapped in thoughts of her lover." Confronted with a puzzling situation, one turns it over in the mind, hoping to make some sense of it. In thinking, people often relive the past. When one asks a friend, "What is your thinking on that?" the answer may detail ambiguities of experience and feelings.

Thinking is an ordinary activity. We think because we are human, and if someone tells us to think, we do not ask a specialist, "How do I do that?" As "a natural need of human life," Hannah Arendt (1977/1978a) concludes, thinking

> is not a prerogative of the few but an ever-present faculty in everybody; by the same token, inability to think is not a failing of the many who lack brain power but an ever-present possibility for everybody--scientists, scholars, and other specialists in mental enterprises not excluded. (p. 191)

The Many Faces of Thinking

More or less conscious of what they are doing, people think as they inhabit their world. To think means "to form or have in mind as an idea"; "to consider, meditate on, ponder"; "to have, or make, a train of ideas pass through the mind," which itself can be reviewed (Oxford English Dictionary). In forming ideas, thinking is imagining or conceiving. Thinking may require effort, as when one applies one's mind to something, giving it a steady mental attention that aims at comprehension. Thoughts can thus be fixed in the mind and worked out in detail. Judgment comes to the fore when thinking involves situations that require forming an opinion, good or bad, valuing or esteeming something or someone, highly or otherwise. And poets have associated thinking with the heart; as Wordsworth wrote, "'Tis the still hour of thinking, feeling, loving."

Some thoughts have their beginning and end in a wonder that is "neither puzzlement nor surprise nor perplexity; it is an admiring wonder" (Arendt, 1977/1978a, p. 143). Holding someone in regard (as the young woman in the Dutch painting does) is not just looking at a person but being drawn to what may be visible only to the inward eye. But thinking can also lead to solving a problem or eventuate in a project whose likely outcomes are considered. Consideration recedes into memory in the senses of "to think" as to call to mind, bear in mind, recollect or remember. "Remembrance has a natural affinity to thought. . . . Thought-trains rise naturally, almost automatically, out of remembering, without any break" (Arendt, 1978b, p. 37).

Thinking plays havoc with the restrictions of life. It can recall the past, make the future present, and move people through time and space. Thoughts are intangible, elastic, light in movement, even fanciful. But innocence is also lost in thought. Hence, thinking is not void of effects. Once one has started a nontrifling argument with oneself, one cannot always abandon it. Literature and experience testify to the disclosing and disturbing powers of thought. And mind's suspension of natural laws coexists with people's belief that there is often a duty to think.

Thoughtful Attention and Goodness

What can one learn about thinking when considering the absence of thought? First, thoughtlessness is less a lack of mental prowess than a missing disposition or capacity for being mindful of things and people. Second, thoughtlessness is no purely descriptive term nor considered a mere mistake. One's failure to acknowledge "the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence" (Arendt, 1977/1978a, p. 4) is also a moral failure. We describe someone as thoughtless who, being heedless, ignores what calls for attention. An assumption is that, with due attention, people can hardly fail to see the import of some particular thing or things, including other people's needs and feelings and their own obligations. Considering how people regard the absence of thought qualifies the airy freedom of thinking.

Iris Murdoch (1970) contends, accordingly, that "the idea of a really good man living in a private dream world seems unacceptable":

> Of course a good man may be infinitely eccentric, but he must know certain things about his surroundings, most obviously the existence of other people and their claims. The chief enemy of excellence in morality . . . is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one. (p. 59)

It is a mistake to assume that what is most personal is also most profound and most reliable as a source of energies; the self often moves in a vain circle. Detached and concerned, thoughtful persons are valued for their attachment to the right objects of thought. Note that objects of thought are not necessarily things but simply that toward which one's attention is directed; their kinds and relations vary by contexts of thought and practice.

Is Practice Practical?

Good carpenters have patience and skill, understand the purposes of their craft, and see more in their work over time. While practice means the habitual carrying on of something--customary or constant action--it also implies ideals of perfection. Comparative imperfections stem from people's shortcomings, the vulnerability of aspirations to chance and circumstance, and the multiplicity of conflicting goods attached to any action. If, in the ordinary case of failure of attention to some good, we are "open to the voice of complaint," William James (1891/1969) observes, the "good which we have wounded returns to plague us with interminable crops of consequential damages, compunctions, and regrets" (p. 188).

Due to the assumption of special knowledge and skill and an associated power over others, participants in a practice should be (in the sense of having a duty to be) people others can trust: trust to do their best, to be honest and fair, to be concerned about the effects of their actions, and to acknowledge the particular claims which their work makes on its practitioners. What sets the professional apart from the chiseler (the person who gets by with minimal efforts, looking out for the self as "number one"), as well as the amateur, has some commonalities across different endeavors. Take a musician's reflections on her performance, for instance:

> I did not expect praise, for that is the prerogative of amateurs, who have a limited objective in view. Once one is a professional musician one's goal is set in infinity. . . . All that one can hope from a professional (even if that be oneself) is an admission that one is in a state of motion, and when this admission is respectful it often takes the paradoxical form of a complaint that one is not moving fast enough. This seems inconsistent, but then to be a professional musician one must . . . [have] a split mind, half of which knows it is impossible to play perfectly, while the other half believes that to play perfectly is only a matter of time and devotion. (West, 1984, p. 124)

What matters in being a professional, she concludes, is walking with others in a "procession that would gloriously never arrive at its destination" (pp. 124-125) and, in so doing, affirming a community of evolving craft.

When people speak of a practice, they have more in mind than a sum of activities, skilled capacities, or the modes and outcomes of typical work. They imagine configurations of goods and excellences that are anchored collectively. This normative concept of practice indicates that human flourishing--acting, thinking, and living well--is not just single or solitary nor simply a skilled production. Weeding the flower beds or checking student tests are not practices in this sense but playing the piano, teaching, and cultivating one's garden are, though there are many different ways of going about these complex, patterned endeavors (see MacIntyre, 1984). Yet each of these ways has a quality of relatedness which, depending on attention, resonates to the possibilities of what one is working with. The learning of a cabinetmaker, like that of a poet, Heidegger (1954/1968) argues,

> is not mere practice, to gain facility in the use of tools. Nor does he merely gather knowledge about the customary forms of the things he is to build. If he is to become a true cabinetmaker, he makes himself answer and respond above all [italics added] to the different kinds of wood and to the shapes slumbering within wood. . . . In fact, this relatedness to wood is what maintains the whole craft. (pp. 14-15)

Thus, showing a new employee around the shop, a seasoned carpenter gives "his usual speech about the importance of choosing wood":

> "Me, I always go for cherry if I can," he said.
> "It's the friendliest, you could put it. The most obedient."
> "Cherry," the man said, nodding.
> "It's very nearly alive. It changes color over time and it even changes shape and it breathes." (Tyler, 1991, p. 250)

Hearing Secret Harmonies

Attention vibrates, deepens, and spreads as understandings and skills develop. If this is true for working with words and wood, it is true in even more compelling ways for working with people, where responsiveness and relatedness take on a special meaning. People relating to others are already related; they make themselves answer to their own kind and must not assume, for instance, that what is best in themselves is, therefore, peculiar to themselves, nor that what gives them most pain is due solely to their own precious sensibilities. Responsiveness that assumes congruence, however, must be leavened and made perspicacious by a thrilling sense of the irreducible uniqueness in the person one confronts.

While the other person has her own urgencies, one can apprehend them only if one has felt them, somehow, oneself; nevertheless, they are not one's own urgencies. These matters become even more perplexing when other people--friends, students, patients--cannot or will not reveal what is urgent to them or what is an impelling, prompting, or constraining force in what they think, feel, and do. So one must learn to hear secret harmonies, but one must hear them accurately and also resonate to them. Hence Elias Canetti (1973/1978) asks:

> But what is urgent? What he feels and recognizes in others and what they cannot say. He must first have felt and recognized it and then found it again in others. The congruence creates the urgency. He has to be capable of two things: to feel strongly and to think; and to hear the others and take them seriously in a never-ending passion. The impression of congruence must be sincere, undimmed by any vanity. . . . He must be able to keep it upright when it threatens to crumble, he has to nourish it incessantly through new experience and effort. (p. 276)

Virtues and Their Obstructions

One cannot take part, in association with others, in some form of human striving if one is mean-spirited, dishonest, unfeeling, vain, or heedless of the goods and excellences which a normative practice embodies and extends. All people are almost compelled by what they can see, but these considerations have a particular moral force for doctors, social workers, and teachers. In these helping professions, practitioners must look beyond the dense, sprawling self to cultivate virtues such as generosity and kindness, sobriety and gentleness, hope and courage in the service of others:

> If someone says that he cares for some individual, community or cause, but is unwilling to risk harm or danger on his, her or its own behalf, he puts in question the genuineness of his care and concern. Courage, the capacity to risk harm or damage to oneself, has its role in human life because of this connection with care and concern. (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 192)

Virtues alone cannot account for human flourishing, however. Thinking of activities as being like rivers, one can see how the fulfillment of their potentials can be obstructed from the outside:

> One way they can be impeded is to be dammed up and prevented from reaching a destination. Another way would be to be filled up with sludge so that their channel would become cramped and muddy, their continuous flow slower, the purity of their waters defiled. (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 327)

In teaching, bureaucratization and "legislated learning" are instances of the second kind of obstruction (see Wise, 1979).

Since not only external factors but misguided ideas and feelings can obstruct any activity that is the bearer of human goods, improving practice requires that people interrupt the flow of everyday cognitions and activities and hold their attention steady in really looking at their work and listening to the people it may affect. Karl Barth (1932/1961) warns:

> Neither the people among whom we have to work, nor things, relations and problems in their everyday form, are waiting for the man who is ready to sacrifice himself for them with some heroism and excitement. On the contrary, men want to be seen and understood as they are. They want to be considered in their situation and from their own point of view, and addressed and treated as such. . . . They are not there as mere objects of our zeal or good intentions or will-power, which must adjust themselves to us as such. Rather, we are there . . . to take to ourselves their need and worth and purpose, and on these presuppositions to give them of our best. (pp. 642-643)

Contemplation sets aside ties to self-involved willing and feeling, to given ways of thinking and schemes of action, making room for the quietly receptive attention that any dedicated work requires.

Devoted Thought That Is Not Deluded

Participation in the contemplative life--rather than preoccupation with utility, desires, abstractions, or immediate circumstances--may be the spring from which the meaning and increasing worth of many actions and decisions originate. Contemplation requires serenity and clarity of vision. It engages the emotions and the will only insofar as these dispose one towards peace and purity of heart and help one direct one's attention to worthy objects. Importantly, it is less those objects than oneself and one's thinking that get changed in the continuing process of contemplation. Via fidelity--faithfulness to others (see Noddings, 1986) and to what there is--truth and goodness converge in a contemplative experience that is not otherworldly.

Thomas Aquinas (1966) discusses the active life and the contemplative life in Summa Theologiæ, where he also examines the question to which form of life teaching might belong. In the active life, people aim to affect things or other people and are often ruffled by their recalcitrance. The life of contemplation may involve a kind of application in cogitation or meditation. But contemplation is the point where activity comes to rest; its essential qualities are those of a wonderstruck beholding, attending to some desirable or lovable good--including any truth whatever. And the goods intrinsic to a practice can be contemplated "not just by dedicated experts but by ordinary people: [in] an attention which is not just the planning of particular good actions but an attempt to look right away from self towards a distant transcendent perfection" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 101).

The Priority of Contemplation

Though the active and the contemplative lives can be distinguished, both are forms of human life, and in an actual existence first the one, then the other form will predominate. And it is possible for action to lead to contemplation and for contemplation to lead to action: Both forms of life are complementary. In accordance with most medieval authors, however, Aquinas (Thomas Aquinas, 1966) maintains that the contemplative is superior to the active life. He stresses that the "return to the active life from the contemplative is by way of direction [emphasis added], in that the active life is guided by the contemplative" (p. 83); divorced from contemplation, the active life would be cut off from its source of value (Appendix 6).

If action is shown the way by contemplation, to which action, as a derivative, must refer back, we can conclude that normative practices begin and end in contemplative thought. It is not difficult to apply these claims

to work in the helping professions. In teaching, for instance, thought and action need to flow from--and return to--raising one's sights to people (primarily students) and teaching subjects; and thought and action without reference to the ultimate good of learning would be without rudder. Inducting people into teaching entails helping them attend to ideals of perfection relating to their work and its distinctive goods, fostering dispositions to think and be concerned about those goods and the people affected by one's work, and upholding--as well as feeling the import of--general human virtues such as truthfulness, sobriety, gentleness, and courage.

Contemplative attention assumes telling force and sustaining energy, for "our ability to act well 'when the time comes' depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 56). It is not only the stance of contemplation and its revealing quality but the worth of the objects to which it attaches itself that accounts for the priority of contemplation, since what people thus hold in regard is, by function and affection, the substance of their comprehensive practical life. Action, to quote Murdoch again, "tends to confirm, for better or worse, the background of attachment from which it issues" (p. 71).

Learning to Attend in the Helping Professions

> Human life is inexhaustible in all its branches. We have to lay hold of it even to find it interesting, let alone to like it. . . . The greatest reward of faithfulness to vocation is to be able to devote ourselves to our concern not only with interest but with desire and love. . . . But this is a reward which we cannot expect nor demand, and at which we are not to aim.
>
> Karl Barth (1932/1961), "Freedom in Limitation," (p. 642)

In their vital imprecision, professional ideals provide a growing sense of order, direction, and deepening meaning. They attach people to their best selves and to worthy objects of attention, illuminate the real and desirable,

and supply ways to distinguish the passable from what is excellent. Teachers, doctors, and nurses, therefore, are people who make decisions, but there are stringent limits to their freedom, which consists more in choosing activities so that one will encounter opportunities and can cultivate abilities for acting on ideals rather than in discovering them--like some newly found islands--or causing them to exist (see Schwartz, 1979). As Martin Buber (1926/1954) says,

> Every form of relation in which the spirit's service of life is realized has its special objectivity, its structure of proportions and limits which in no way resists the fervour of personal comprehension and penetration, though it does resist any confusion with the person's own spheres. (p. 95)

Helping people become attached to ideals of perfection in their work is hence a crucial practical task, which depends on recalling what a practice is about in the first place. "Meaningful devotion," as Barth (1932/1961, p. 643) calls it, must be well guided and closely informed. What keeps doctors, nurses, social workers, and teachers from seeing other people with accuracy and kindness is not just their private blind spots, however, but also the categories and theories in terms of which professionals may think of their clients. To clarify the meaning and development of contemplative attention in teaching and other helping professions, I will relate several stories.

Letting Go of Protective Theories

Going back to the beginnings of his life as a psychiatrist, Robert Coles (1989) describes his professional learning in terms of developing a certain direction and quality of attention, concluding that the issue "was not only whether a doctor trained in pediatrics and child psychiatry might help a child going through a great deal of social and racial stress, but what the nature of my attention ought to be" (p. 25). How, in short, was he to use his mind?

As a novice, Coles was aware of his lack of knowledge, a strong command of various theories and classification schemes notwithstanding. His first response to the demands of dealing with patients was mobilizing social authority: Whatever his shortcomings in maturity and competence, he could get a nurse to bring a patient to him. His second response, encouraged by a supervisor admired as a brilliant theorist, was to establish (rapidly and almost aggressively) conceptual control of the situation. Yet Coles was quick to sense the "protective function of theory." He writes that, having acquired an "intellectual fix" on what happened during "therapeutic" sessions,

> I often found myself feeling less afraid for myself, if not for the patient. I now "knew" her, and I could look forward to yet another chance to listen, to inquire, to hear confirmed what I'd been taught [italics added]. As for the occasional moments of doubt and worry (Why isn't she getting any better?), my supervisor had some analgesic words. (Coles, 1989, p. 9)

Less inclined to soothe the young doctor's pains, another supervisor "encouraged a gentler tone, a slower pace, a different use of the mind" (Coles, 1989, p. 14). Listening to the novice more than talking himself--although not hesitant to teach pointedly at times--this older doctor encouraged a shift from theories and patient classifications to concrete persons and their stories. He asked questions like "Do you see her in your mind?" or "Did you stop and wonder what he's now going through?" Implicitly, this supervisor was asking whose words mattered, who was to appropriate the word "interesting."

Throughout his career, Coles (1989) recalled his teacher's words that

> the people who come to see us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember that what we hear is their story. (p. 7)

The doctor struggling to learn began to discover the mind-opening power of listening to his patients "with a minimum of conceptual static" (p. 19). This shift in the quality and direction of professional thinking brought a partial reversal of roles, for people troubled in mind became the doctor's teachers, enabling him to help them.

The professional knowledge of the second supervisor in Coles's story includes an understanding of the central value of the pretheoretical--an understanding that, among other things, implies turning one's back on any controlling or defensive uses of expert knowledge. These psychiatrists accomplished a movement of return in the service of profession: recognizing and enacting a shared humanity in the form and content of stories and providing the occasion for telling and listening to them with revealing attention.

Mind-Opening Attention in Teaching

In moving from psychiatry to teaching, much remains the same. There are still professional learners needing to pay attention to people as concrete persons and to transcendent ideals that embody and extend a practice. The distinctive learning teachers are supposed to advance, however, is primarily children's learning of school subjects. Teaching differs from other helping professions in having subject matter as its first object of contemplation. Students and teaching subjects can neither be known altogether nor once and for all. The more they really look at their students, the more teachers recognize that their knowledge of learners is imperfect--a fallible vision also because youngsters change, and are supposed to change, in school. The more teachers think about their subjects, the less they are sure of their ground, becoming clearer about the limits of given understandings.

Contemplating teaching subjects. In accordance with Aquinas, the first object of contemplation in teaching is the unending consideration and love of knowledge in all of its forms, with the teacher taking delight in that love and consideration. Referring to Aristotle, Aquinas (Thomas Aquinas, 1966) argues that the ability to teach is an indication of learning (p. 59). Since wisdom and truth belong to the contemplative life, he concludes that teaching belongs to the contemplative life. The implicit connections here seem as follows: One can teach because one has learned something; ultimately, learning is oriented towards truth and wisdom, involving, therefore, continuing contemplation.

Compared to other activities of thinking in teaching, contemplative attention to teaching subjects has logical, though not necessarily temporal, priority in teaching (see Buchmann, 1984). One needs to have a sense of the concept of number and enjoy wondering about that idea--thus complicating one's understanding and sensing its limits--in order to help others think about what a number may be. Without knowing how to look at a painting and recognizing an artistic creation for what it is, what can a teacher say about a child's drawing except that it is "nice" or "true to life"?

When one manages to look with observant wonder, one will often become dissatisfied with conventional answers--whether based on common sense, textbooks, or science. This means that one becomes teachable again; Hawkins (1967/1974) tells a pertinent story about a young and very learned physicist:

> My wife was asking him to explain something to her about two coupled pendulums. He said, "Well, now, you can see that there's a conservation of . . . Well, there's really a conservation of angle here." She looked at him. "Well, you see, in the transfer of energy from one pendulum to the other there is . . ." and so on and so on. And she said, "No, I don't mean that. I want you to notice this and tell me what's happening." Finally, he looked at the pendulums and he saw what she was asking. He looked at it,

> and he looked at her, and he grinned and said, "Well, I know the right words but I don't understand it either." This confession, wrung from a potential teacher, I've always valued very much. It proves that we're all in it together. (p. 62)

It is essential that teachers share, with their students, in an authentic and renewing engagement in looking at the world, at what there is outside oneself.

Wonder has its place as well in literary learning. Consider a poem. That it is patterned writing, arranged in lines, metrical and often rhyming, indicates something, but not all that much. To say that it is "poetic" or "the work of a poet" begs the question, while to claim that a poem is concerned with feelings or the imagination may be a falsehood--or a truism. After a lifetime as a poet, Robert Lowell (1977) asked in his "Epilogue," What is a poem for? What is a poet supposed to do--remember or create? His concluding lines draw reader and poet together into contemplation:

> We are poor passing facts,
> warned by that to give
> each figure in the photograph
> his living name. (p. 127)

When they are inside their subjects, teachers, like poets, obviously know many things outsiders do not know. They are aware of major, often divergent perspectives, know how to work with specialized terms and symbols, and know that language should be arranged in certain ways: essays, proofs, or sonnets. In this they will be different from their students. But if teachers go beyond the surface of terms and forms and begin asking where concepts and patterns come from--or what they may mean--smooth answers will give way, leaving things to marvel at. This is true for everyday objects as well as for poems and pendulums. In looking at a teacup, a woman reflects:

> How little she knew about anything. Take this cup for instance; she held it out in front of her. What was it made of? Atoms? And what were atoms, and how did they stick together? The

smooth hard surface of the china with its red flowers seemed to her for a second a marvellous mystery. (Woolf, 1937, p. 155)

Seeing concrete persons in teaching. If subject matter is the first object of contemplation in teaching, its second object are students. "Object," again, must not be confused with "thing"; it means "that toward which attention is directed" and does not imply any reified conception of people. Aquinas (Thomas Aquinas, 1966) connects contemplation to the active life in teaching by stating that "it seems an office of the contemplative life to impart to another by teaching, truth that has been contemplated" (p. 61). Office here has the meaning of good office, a kindness or attention in the service of others; Aquinas (Thomas Aquinas, 1973) also points out, "just as it is better to illumine than merely to shine, so it is better to give to others the things contemplated than simply to contemplate" (p. 205).

Genuine relatedness in teaching depends on being attached to one's teaching subjects in the first place, while also caring for others in helping them to learn. That teachers' attention is urged on toward others also follows from the relation that exists in human life between what one most delights in and the wish to be sharing it with others, particularly one's friends. To the extent that teaching involves other people--aiming to enlighten and perfect them as learners--the helping profession of teaching belongs to the active life and requires its skillful and well-informed exertions in the spirit of fellowship and kindness. Aquinas therefore concludes that teaching sometimes belongs to the active and sometimes to the contemplative life. Yet in moving from contemplation to action we do not subtract the contemplative but add the active dimension: The active life in teaching "proceeds from the fullness of contemplation" (Thomas Aquinas, 1973, p. 205). To drive this point home, I have adapted a story from Iris Murdoch (1970).

Suppose that a secondary English teacher, Miss Jacobs, notices her hostility toward a new student. From the first day of school, John grates on his teacher's feelings. He seems uncouth in behavior and raw in intellect, overfamiliar and moody--always tiresomely adolescent. Miss Jacobs herself is a quiet person, a bit severe but intelligent and well intentioned. She knows that she is not at her best with boys of that age; in general, she cannot say that she likes adolescents. A term passes. Yet the teacher does not perfect her view of John as an impossible boy, firming it up in outline and elaborating it in detail; that is, she does not make her aversive picture of this student more impenetrable and solid.

Miss Jacobs has instead come to see John as endearingly awkward; his raw intellect now seems an untutored intelligence that calls for teaching. John appears to be not overfamiliar and excitable but trusting and emotional to the point of being vulnerable. Protective, almost tender feelings supplant the earlier hostility. What has happened? John has not changed; he is still a rather pestilential adolescent. Nor has Miss Jacobs been busy in any external sense or drawn up plans to change him. On the surface, the teacher has substituted one set of (moral) words for another, with positive instead of negative meaning. But deep down she has been thinking, attentively, until she could give John, as Lowell put it, his "living name."

A change of vision can be a delusion, but let us further suppose that his teacher has looked at John (and beyond the stereotype); she has concentrated her attention on him (and away from her own sensitivities and limitations), achieving an inward stance and progress of intrinsic worth and attraction that does student and teacher good. Part of this progress stems from setting aside self-centered feelings together with conventional and

self-protective modes of classification; yet the greater part stems from seeing John not just with accuracy but with kindness as a concrete person. In this fashion, Miss Jacobs has come to see much more of John's traits and aspirations, many of which are repeated in other adolescents, but which the teacher attends to "not as pieces of something homogenous that turns up in many places in the universe, but as forming the essential core of what that concrete person is" (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 357). There is John's generosity of heart and his painful desire to see the world set right, which surface in awkwardness and mood swings. Why do adults, who act so godlike and knowing, make such a mess of things, between famines, wars, and divorces?

As Miss Jacobs feels John's accusing eyes on herself, she has to admit that she does not understand it either. The teacher also knows that she would prefer to be seen less as a member of the pretentious and floundering tribe of adults and more as herself: imperfect but real. Still, she realizes that it may not be in John's power, now, to fulfill that wish, nor is it his duty to do so. Through thinking, Miss Jacobs prepares herself to be loyal to John in her professional role, becoming attached to what is most excellent in him and choosing to make his good as a learner her own.

Contemplative attention is one's corrigible vision of other people and the response to their reality, the careful vision of their truth, which is their individuality, separate and distinct from oneself. Such attentive thinking involves a personal application that is not of the will; it is a modifying and disclosing force that works by progressive inward operation. In this way of looking, "the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth" (Weil, 1950/1951, p. 115).

From Decision to Clear-Sighted, Careful Vision

What the ideal and the unknown demand is infinitely perfectible, attentive thought. In focusing on planning and decision making, scholars and educators have only partially comprehended the thinking that teaching requires. In general, it is difficult to lead an excellent life if its basic activities are not seen fully and clearly. Scholarly failure converts into practical failure through policy and also in its support of popular misconceptions. The quietly receptive attention I have associated with both objects of contemplation in teaching is inherently appealing, self-renewing, and a rich source of professional development. There can, however, be no genuine relatedness in teaching, no resonating to people's possibilities as learners, without intelligent care and concern for teaching subjects.

Teaching is structured by a generative background of attachments that hold no matter what; this normative concept of practice appeals to a concept of teaching as a virtuous activity that is a bearer of human goods and has a distinctive scope, proper energies, and ends. Thus teaching calls for contemplation as a kind of devoted thinking in which one is not deluded or possessed by one's will or ideas:

> a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one's eyes but of a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline. (Murdoch, 1970, p. 38)

In carefully attending to subject matter, learners, and professional ideals, teachers maintain and perfect their singularly vibrant craft and themselves, while enlightening and perfecting others.

References

Arendt, H. (1978a). The life of the mind: Vol. 1. Thinking. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. (Original work published 1977)

Arendt, H. (1978b). The life of the mind: Vol. 2. Willing. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Barth, K. (1961). Church dogmatics: Volume 3. The doctrine of creation, Part four (G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance, Eds.). Edinburgh: T & T Clark. (Original work published 1932)

Buber, M. (1954). Education. In R. G. Smith (Trans.), Between man and man (pp. 83-103). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. (Original work published 1926)

Buchmann, M. (1984). The priority of knowledge and understanding in teaching. In L. G. Katz & J. D. Raths (Eds.), Advances in teacher education (Volume 1, pp. 29-50). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Canetti, E. (1978). The human province (J. Neugroschel, Trans.). New York: Seabury. (Original work published 1973)

Coles, R. (1989). The call of stories: Teaching and the moral imagination. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Haezrahi, P. (1956). The contemplative activity: A study in aesthetics. New York: Abelard-Schuman.

Hawkins, D. (1974). I, thou, and it. In The informed vision: Essays on learning and human nature (pp. 48-62). New York: Agathon Press. (Original work published 1967)

Heidegger, M. (1968). What is called thinking? (F. D. Wieck & J. G. Gray, Trans.) New York: Harper & Row. (Original work published 1954)

James, W. (1969). The moral philosopher and the moral life. In J. K. Roth (Ed.), The moral philosophy of William James (pp. 169-191). New York: Thomas Y. Crowell. (Original work published 1891)

Lowell, R. (1977). Day by day. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

MacIntyre, A. (1984). After virtue: A study in moral theory. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Murdoch, I. (1970). The sovereignty of good. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Noddings, N. (1986). Fidelity in teaching, teacher education, and research for teaching. Harvard Educational Review, 56, 496-510.

Nussbaum, M. C. (1986). The fragility of goodness. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Schopenhauer, A. (1956). Third book: The world as idea: Second aspect. In I. Edman (Ed.), The philosophy of Schopenhauer (pp. 135-214). New York: Modern Library. (Original work published 1844)

Schwartz, A. (1979). Aristotle on education and choice. Educational Theory. 29, 97-107.

Thomas Aquinas, Saint (1966). Summa theologiæ. Volume 46. Action and contemplation (2a2æ. 179-182) (J. Aumann, Ed.). New York: Blackfriars.

Thomas Aquinas, Saint (1973). Summa theologiæ. Volume 47. The pastoral and religious lives (2a2æ. 183-9) (J. Aumann, Ed.). New York: Blackfriars.

Tyler, A. (1991). Saint maybe. New York: Knopf.

Weil, S. (1951). Reflections on the right use of school studies with a view to the love of God. In E. Craufurd (Trans.), Waiting for God (pp. 105-116). New York: Putnam. (Original work published 1950)

West, R. (1984). This real night. London: Macmillan.

Wise, A. E. (1979). Legislated learning: The bureaucratization of the American classroom. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Woolf, V. (1937). The years. New York: Harcourt, Brace.