BEYOND OPPOSITIONAL THINKING: RADICAL RESPECT

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As a post-9/11 society in the United States we live in a complex and pluralistic world that pushes us to rethink how we approach education. We say we want to know what is right and good, but how to discern this in a world where consensual understandings of meaning are missing, even within our own borders?

We, in the northern and particularly western hemisphere, have defined what is good and true in relationship to how we understand their opposites. This is a view rooted in a western history of logic based on the Aristotelian principle of noncontradiction: You cannot have A and not A at the same time. John Dewey represents this view when he says humans like to think in duality, black/white, good/evil, or conservative/liberal. Dewey's assertion assumes duality is a universal basis for rational reflection**.** But this "forced choice" thinking is not necessarily benign; it can foster exclusionary social practices where people become pitted against each other, resulting in some being deemed more valuable than others.

We propose that the formation of radical respect can move students and teachers beyond the confines of oppositional thinking and relating. Furthermore, we believe the formation of radical respect is "caught" as much as it is "taught," and the classroom is a valid place for this endeavor.[1]

In the Beginning: Radical Respect

The assumption that people think in forced choice paradigms does not hold for everybody. The yin and the yang orientation of many cultures is one example. What if the classroom can become a setting that is more open to these different orientations to the world? Paulo Freire gives us a place to start when he speaks of education as holistic practice, one that has respect at its center:

> we are talking about the impossibility of…separating practice and theory, authority and freedom, ignorance and knowledge, respect for the teacher and respect for the students, and teaching and learning. None of these terms can be mechanically separated from the other.[2]

Freire challenges the notion of duality and calls for an integrated approach to teaching that incorporates all aspects of theory and practice in the classroom grounded in radical respect. Radical respect goes beyond conventional notions of respect in that it intentionally engages the political, policy, and power dynamics of institutions and ways of thinking. Educators Rebecca Chopp and

Mark Lewis Taylor concur when they say: "radical respect is a way of educating that takes seriously the reforming of our academic and political life together."[3] Such an educational agenda will encourage different expressions of knowledge without a single voice or point of view determining the final outcome of the educational process.

Freire stresses that education is not neutral. Furthermore, he argues for an education that fosters our capacity to transform the world, "of naming things, of deciding, of choosing, of valuing, and finally, of *ethicizing* the world."[4] We agree and emphasize that transformation is not a one-way process. We must also become transformed, *ethicized* to a deeper relational and respectful appreciation of the multiple expressions of what is worthwhile and life giving in this complex global community in which we live. This will require our ability to tolerate the ambiguity that is involved in relating across differences, a move that is not easy and definitely not comfortable. But we must enter this new terrain, and we ignore it to our own peril.

The Current Landscape: A Snapshot

Since teachers are historical and cultural beings, they bring particular beliefs and paradigms into the classroom that influence how they relate to students. Cesar Augusto Rossatto claims that how teachers internally view their position in the world and their classroom "roles" will determine their *operandum* beliefs.[5] When new teachers come into the classroom and meet their students who come from different historical locations, a clash of belief systems often reveals an *operandum* rooted in oppositional thinking, and has the potential to erupt into oppositional relating—us against them. Oppositional thinking that gives rise to oppositional attitudes and behavior leaves little room for tackling complex ideas with our students.

Furthermore, the standard forms of curriculum are often the silent partners of oppositional thinking, reinforcing it and re-inscribing exclusionary western worldviews. Classrooms across this nation have children of diversity trying to negotiate between what they know and experience and the requirements of the dominant paradigm.

When a student from an underrepresented group tells the teacher she does not understand the story problem because one of the words is completely culturally foreign to her, the teacher is faced with this reality of clashing worldviews. Too often the teacher is at a loss for how to engage the student before her who comes from a background so widely different from her own. She is expected to teach the students the explicit curriculum, and if she does this well, the students' scores will increase on standardized tests. Perplexed by her dilemma, she falls back on afamiliar *modus operandum,* and begins to see the student as an obstacle to the learning process. In this approach she is in opposition to the student, rendering the student for all intents and purposes invisible.

Students are expected to conform to the classroom ethos, often reflecting the teacher's worldview. The student whose own worldviews and experiences do not match either resist or "play the game"— either way their educational needs are not met. "The world has seen too many tragedies result from a mono-cultural, monotheist historical interpretation."[6] Too often these tragedies go unnoticed in the daily practices of our work within unquestioned assumptions and paradigms.

Yet, tragedy is only one lens. Irony provides another, and suggests something else: What appear as "normal" and "true" can actually be their opposites. And what may appear as naive and wrong may actually provide a means and outcome that is worthwhile and good. The following summary of *When the Spirit Catches You, You Fall Down*, captures some of this reality we are considering.[7]

Interlude: A Story of Misunderstanding and Good Intentions

When the Spirit Catches You is a tale of good intentions and deep misunderstandings as a modern western medical team tries to help a young Hmong child with severe epilepsy. By looking at some of the issues involved we can, by analogy, see how these same issues impact educational settings where racial or ethnic and cultural differences are present.

When Lia Lee was first diagnosed with epilepsy the doctors were conscientious and thorough in their medical assessments. However, as Lia continued to have seizures her parents began to think that western medicine was doing Lia more harm than good, and they decided to stop giving her the prescribed drugs. Because of their "noncompliance," one of Lia's doctors got a court order to remove Lia from her parent's home. The parents finally got her back when they agreed to follow the doctor's orders. But Lia went on having seizures and her treatment resulted in Lia losing her higher brain functions.

From the doctors' view, the outcome of Lia's ordeal was a result of her parents not understanding how medicine works. But from Lia's parent's point of view, they understood their daughter's malady as a result of her being born with a condition known as *qaug dab peg* ''the spirit catches you and you fall down.'' While they trusted western medicine, they also believed their daughter needed the chants, charms, and sacrifices of the traditional Hmong healer. As a last resort the traditional healer came to the hospital and chanted over Lia in order to call back her soul.

Toward the end of the book the author tells of a poignant exchange between Lia's mother and one of the doctors. The doctor's child had been diagnosed with leukemia. Upon learning this Lia's mother embraced the other woman, and they cried in each other's arms. Their tears cut through the cultural barriers that seemed insurmountable. Their very different backgrounds that led

to incredible misunderstanding receded as they exchanged the gift of human touch.

Lia's doctors were well-intentioned and well-trained professionals. They wanted to make the power of modern medicine available to a family who wanted healing for their daughter. But this family did not see illness in the same way the doctors did, and the doctors saw the medical model they had been trained in as the sole protocol for treating Lia's illness. The resulting clash of values was tragic and perhaps unnecessary. Like the doctors in this story, many teachers would like to make modern western knowledge available to people who want to learn but who do not see education in the same way many teachers do. How might they proceed without inflicting unintentional harm?

To engage this dilemma, special attention needs to be given to respecting the chorus of voices coming from the different locations so one dominant perspective does not remain the primary "yardstick" of educational effectiveness.

Formation for Radical Respect

Formation for radical respect involves more than encouraging inter-subjective esteem, it means taking seriously the root of the word "radical" wherein all related parties are potentially changed. It means we recognize one another's absolute integrity, beauty, and completeness. It means there are other worlds that we do not "know" that shake our previously held convictions.

Allowing our worldviews to be questioned can open us to be changed by those who are different from us with whom we are in relationship. It can open up new avenues for developing theories and practices of moral education where we are not the ones setting the terms or constructing the frameworks of knowledge. However, this will not be easy and without risk, it will involve giving up some of our taken-for-granted ways of providing education. It will even call into question our definitions of respect and our understandings of right and wrong and how to achieve good and moral ends.

Radical respect requires that we foster a communal understanding without the aim of necessarily reaching a *common* agreement. Communal understanding engages in an intentionally shared process of meaning making as a way of honoring multiple perspectives. To engage this way of knowing, we need to create a "safe enough" environment to foster a tolerance for ambiguity, where we entertain the notion that there is more than one "right" way to interpret, or address an educational dilemma. Instead of a final answer, we may need to live in questions and multiple interpretations. A safe-enough classroom will involve modeling radical respect by teachers and others in the classroom. This will mean cultivating a classroom of cooperation, not competition. It will involve resisting binary thinking and rediscovering the neglected virtue of gratitude for classroom interactions and deliberations.[8]

The kind of radical respect we are talking about involves six dimensions. These dimensions can be understood as educational practices rather than skills that a particular teacher employs. Practices are not individual acts. Practices are something that people participate in together over time.[9] They are educational in that they lead all parties into a critically engaged response from a communal, cooperative endeavor. As a framework for radical respect these practices begin with a three-fold practice of listening.

Radical Respect as a Communal Practice of Listening

Listening is central to an educational environment and is normally seen as the empathetic posture of the teacher toward her students. While empathetic listening has proven effective for many people, it is limiting for others, as in the case of Lia and her family. Lia required more; she needed the listening borne by the wisdom of her community of origin in order to become well. The same can be said for those in our classrooms who need the wisdom and knowledge from their various communities of origin in order to learn.

Empathetic listening can also fool those of us in the dominant culture into thinking we understand more than we actually do. We need to recognize that there are many things that we do not know and perhaps can never know, just as the western medical doctors did not know the healing arts to help Lia and her family. In fact, it is precisely our "not knowing" our "not understanding" that lead us to an honest way of encountering others who experience the world differently from the way we do. Anthropologist Ruth Behar, speaking of cultural differences, says that the best we can do when we are faced with what we cannot know is to attempt a "translation," not a false understanding.[10] Without this humble posture, understanding risks becoming presumptuous or, worse, imperialistic, but in any event, dangerous. Therefore, listening needs to take the form of radical respect. This may seem obvious, but in practice it is not always easy.

Listening with absolute respect does not stop with tolerance. Absolute respect is more than what some refer to as "acceptance of differences." Absolute respect is proactive listening and involves the willingness to make a commitment to the deep humanness of another. Commitment is active beyond empathy. Here, listening participates in a form of trust building that is prior to all educational endeavors.

Listening from the posture of radical respect means listening with a special kind of inner silence where we attempt to discard our preconceived notions, theories, and hunches about someone and their experiences. An incomplete gesture to be sure, but such an attempt invites someone like Lia and her family, or the students in our classrooms, to express themselves on their own terms. It means privileging and listening for their frame of reference. It involves listening even when we cannot empathize or understand. Listening to someone in this way means to listen with interest, curiosity, and an open imagination.

Unlike empathy, imagination draws upon different sources of wisdom that do not require the kinds of connections based on similarities. Imagination can open us to new possibilities not contained in conventional definitions of how our world operates. It can allow one to be unguardedly grasped by the reality of another—like when the two mothers embraced. They may not have "understood" each other's worlds and meanings, yet they recognized the tears in each other's eyes. This is what radical respect entails. It fosters a compassion that is indispensable for an educational commitment that dares to entertain alternative social realities within the concrete classroom situation.

Listening with imagination means to become willing to co-imagine an educational setting of restored dignity, freedom, and hope. It means seeing the tears of Lea's mother and those of the doctor's wife as beautiful. It means recognizing that while each may be taking very different journeys through their grief, both are equally valid and valuable, and worthy of respect. To impose one interpretation of tears would be not only unhelpful, it would be wrong. The same can be said of those in our classrooms whose ways of knowing are varied and complete. Listening to others with imagination participates in justice as the integrity of the participants is honored. It means listening to someone like Lia and her family who may occupy our classroom and refusing to stand above them (imperialistic) or behind them (letting difference stand alone) instead alongside them (cultural engagement) in an expression of mutual respect. Radical respect finally involves what Maxine Green means when she talks about "being willing to look into each other's eyes and urge each other on to new beginnings."[11]

This first movement of listening involves hearing the larger cultural and social context where oppositional thinking and relating affects each one of us. Listening with imagination offers a way to counter life-denying forces in the world. As Green suggests, "imagining things being otherwise may be a first step toward acting on the belief that they can be changed."[12] Such imaginative listening creates space for a shift to occur that offers different levels of connection between people in unpredictable ways. Listening means to respect, and to completely believe someone.

Radical Respect as Communal Practices Believing

Believing what we hear, especially when we do not understand, deepens what it means to listen. It provides a receptive attitude that is necessary for the kind of struggle that it takes to enter into the framework of those before us. It builds on the wisdom of the imagination and begins to shift the accent away from insight, from "seeing is believing," to a relational way of knowing: "believing is seeing." To believe the ones we do not understand is to become deeply involved with them. This deep involvement is where trust becomes deepened as people begin to enter a relationship that is not oppositional. But to listen in this manner is a risky business. It is where the safety nets of given

theories and agreed-upon teaching strategies are suspended. You could be fooled. You could even fail. In any event you will be changed!

Perhaps believing in this manner is a bit like trying to become the trapeze artist. As you let go of the familiar bar you fly suspended in mid air as you wait, trusting you will be caught. To put yourself out there and believe someone, not believe in the abstract, but believe another flesh-and-blood human being without reservation, means that you are far less than the expert by yourself. Because of this you will need the wisdom of a community of listeners "to catch you," because they have a claim on you and you on them. This suggests a more shared understanding of authority in the classroom. No one person, not even the most accomplished teacher, can alone discern the contours of a new educational horizon. We need the wisdom of others we are in relationships with because these "tellers of tales" hold keys to new knowledge and new visions of meaning making beyond oppositional thinking and relating.

But the willingness to believe what we do not know will involve relinquishing a certain sense of security as our familiar theories and practices become de-centered. "Off center" is a disorienting place to be, and it can be painful and disturbing, leaving one doubting oneself. In this kind of process our authority becomes partial and more vulnerable. Yet this very location is necessary if we are to become open to new meanings that can inform what is good, true, and beautiful.

Radical Respect as Communal Practices of Attention

When we listen and believe another we enter a kind of null moment when familiar professional trappings begin to be relinquished and something new holds the possibility of coming into view.[13] When we attend to someone, some scene, or some situation, we do not just look and see what is in front of us. If we truly pay attention we are moved, involved, and deeply touched. Simone Weil refers to this when she says, "the authentic and pure values truth, beauty, and goodness in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object." She goes even further to say "Teaching should have no aim but to prepare, by training the attention, for the possibility of such an act."[14] Radical respect reclaims this null moment of attention. To be moved, touched, and involved to the point of being open to be transformed by new knowledge takes us, sometimes painfully, beyond oppositional thinking and relating to some place new.

Attention honors the "givenness" of the other with whom I am related. It is this "givenness" that precedes any description or any theory of education. It is the poetry that comes before prose. Again Weil is helpful when she says, "The poet produces the beautiful by fixing her attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love." Like the poet, when the teacher fixes her full attention on the student, she helps create something beautiful. This is where teaching becomes an act of love.

Attention is more than an intense form of listening. It is an acute kind of hearing that evokes new speech that has never been spoken before. It invites speech that not only reflects the particular reality of someone, but also refracts it in such a way that we can begin to catch a glimpse of it in all of its complexity. When we allow our hearts to be open by this complexity, we will find that advocacy for those who have been displaced by our theories and practices have a place in our research and teaching. This is so because advocacy arises out of radical respect for those who deserve a more just and humane setting to develop and thrive.

Radical Respect as Communal Practices of Advocacy

The act of respecting people requires actions that provide dignity and justice for their wellbeing. This will involve commitment and public action to transform our educational institutions that adversely impact the lives of children and their families. Such advocacy will cooperate with people by linking them to systems of power and public policy. Radical respect, then, will involve the educator in public life in order to help break up the false belief that neutrality is possible in educational theories and practices. It will mean unmasking false neutrality that actually leads our educational systems to comply with injustice rather than foster freedom and authentic democratic spaces. Advocacy means that radical respect is a communal practice that will involve us in public renewal through political engagement.

Radical Respect as Communal Practices of Restoration

Advocacy aims at restoring lived expressions of justice and mutual respect in the classroom and institutional policies and procedures. Restoration means that children and adults in our classrooms who are silenced and rendered invisible by "business as usual" are heard, believed, and honored and are no longer displaced outside the face-to-face educational community. In this sense restoration offers a kind of "hospitality" that creates the possibility for wholeness in our educational life where multiple ways of knowing are honored. This vision of hospitality is contrary to displays of cynicism or soft optimism that keep people who are perceived as different invisible. It is also contrary to any easy notion of community building. Restoration can be a pain-filled process because of the histories of misunderstandings and betrayals between the dominating cultures and others. Therefore any attempt at restoration can never be jettisoned or trivialized.

At the same time, while restoration cannot be forced whole, it can be rehearsed in part; practiced in brave ways that offer glimpses to help keep hope for a time beyond oppositional thinking and relating alive. Restoration implies a pedagogy of listening where radical mutuality is risked for deep visions of wellbeing. Only from this involved educational practice is it possible to begin a process of interpretation that can represent people's lives.

Perhaps through actions that oppose injustice the educator can earn the right to begin a process of interpretation with the people with whom she relates. We say "perhaps," because we cannot take this for granted. Interpretation is always provisional in form and a gift in fact. It is always partial and hazardous.

Even when the educational task of interpretation seeks to be just and freeing, it involves a degree of representation that reduces the full expression of an event, and the people who are part of it, to something different from the original experience. This involves a kind of ethical violence toward those being represented through any interpretation.[15] Interpretation will never be innocent, even though it must be attempted.

Furthermore, interpretation cannot be one way. Interpretation that means one person explains another (the empirical model) will not work for an educational praxis based in radical respect. Behar describes this dilemma for anthropology:

> it is gratuitous to think that an ethnographer "gets" a less-privileged woman's "experience" by taking down her life story; and it is even more gratuitous to think that her work is done when she has framed the other woman's "own words" with a few comfortable generalizations that make no connections to her own position as the one who brings the story back across the border.[16]

This observation fits the story of Lia Lee where her doctors studied the cultural mores of the Hmong people but did not allow them to challenge their way of practicing medicine.

We can paraphrase Bihar's observations from anthropology for an education based on radical respect:

> It is gratuitous to think that *a teacher* "gets*" the experience of someone who is from a different culture, background, and so forth* by taking down *their* story; and it is even more gratuitous to think that *the teacher's* work is done *when the child's story is* framed *in his or her* "own words" with a few attempts at generalizations…*What remains is to make stronger connections* to *our own positions* as those who bring the story back.[17]

We cannot stop with simply making a connection between those in our classrooms and the context of their living, or even with our advocating with them to change educational structures. What remains is to make the connection to our own positions as those who describe the situation. Through this kind of connection the educator also becomes interpreted. Our own knowledge and position becomes revealed through our relationships with those in our classrooms. In other words our *operandum* becomes exposed, revealed, and available for critique. A clearer understanding of who we are and what we are practicing begins to emerge. We begin to see how radical respect places "us" in

a situation of being "other" and how classroom power dynamics begin to change. As a Chicana character in a story by Sandra Cisnersos says, "Making the world look at you from my eyes. And if that's not power, what is?"[18]

Becoming seen through the eyes of others is about shifting power relationships, and that might make us feel uncomfortable. As Behar reflects: We will come to an awareness of the "privilege" of our pens, and how we have gained the authority to speak, teach, conduct research and write texts.[19] Here, interpretation reveals the painfully relational character of knowledge. It can mean facing our unintentional complicity in another's suffering, which can be terrifying and which is both why we avoid it and why it is so necessary to do.

Radical respect means that the voices of children and adults who bring different experiences into our classrooms are not simply added to our theories and practices. These voices are necessary in order for us to even understand our own theories and practices— and finally, who we are.

Interpretation brings radical respect full-circle. Through radical respect we become vulnerable and mirrored through the eyes of each other. This makes teaching paradoxical and at the same time a hopeful enterprise. Each of us confronts our respective inability to comprehend the experience of another and yet we recognize the absolute necessity of continuing the effort to do so.[20]

Conclusion

The six practices of radical respect begin to shift the reigning educational paradigm from individual authority in the classroom to encounters of interdependence and shared power. Education, then, becomes joined to projects of liberation, and personal insights broaden to historical consciousness. Educational philosophy becomes tied to social analysis, and hyper-rationalism is tempered by imagination and visions of the heart. Radical respect is a form of commitment to education that seeks to participate in what Freire calls "a pedagogy of freedom,"[21] a freedom that takes seriously the reforming of our academic and political life together and is dedicated to a vision of the full flourishing of all people.

Notes

1. Patrick Finn, *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in Their Own Self-Interest* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999). See also Shirley Steinberg and Joe Kincheloe, *Contextualizing Teaching.* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2000), 70–75 and 270–78.

2. Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage.* (Lanham, Md.: Roman and Littlefield, 1998), 88.

3. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor, *Reconstructing Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 21.

4. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Indignation* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2004), 3–20 and 31–40.

5. Cesar Augusto Rossatto. *Engaging Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of Possibility: From Blind to Transformative Optimism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 1–5.

6. Joe Kincheloe, *Critical Pedagogy Primer* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 51.

7. Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998).

8. An example of such an environment is the ethnographic description of Mr. Greg's classroom in Rosalie M. Romano's *Forging an Educative Community: The Wisdom of Love, the Power of Understanding, and the Terror of It All* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

9. Craig Dykstra, "Reconceiving Practice," unpublished paper, 11.

10. Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 297–302.

11. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Chang*e (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 43.

12. Ibid.

13. Simone Weil explores the phenomenon of "attention" extensively in her writings. The full attention to the object (for our purposes, the subject) is the venue for discerning authentic and "pure values– truth, beauty and goodness." Furthermore, in *Gravity and Grace* she states: "Teaching should have no aim but to prepare, by training the attention, for the possibility of such an act" (New York: Ark Paperbacks, 1987).

14. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 109.

15. Behar, *Translated Woman*, 271.

16. Ibid., 272.

17. Ibid. (emphasis added).

18. Sandra Cisneros, "Never Marry a Mexican," in *Woman Hollering Creek*, (New York: Random House, 1991), 75.

19. Behar, *Translated Woman,* 338.

20. Linda Brodkey, "Writing Critical Ethnographic Narratives," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 18 (1987), 74.

21. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor, *Reconstructing Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: FortressPress, 1994), 21–22.