



PROJECT MUSE®

From Cognition to Being

McHenry, Henry Davis

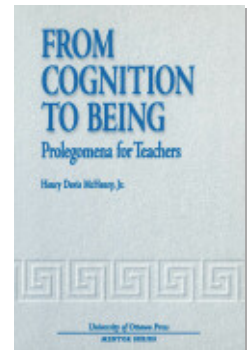
Published by University of Ottawa Press

McHenry, Davis.

From Cognition to Being: Prolegomena for Teachers.

Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1999.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/6563>

PREFACE

In a dream I had recently, I am in a hilly, rocky field with shacks and farm sheds. I have come to teach the children of the local population, who don't even take the trouble to scorn the idea of school. I ask one of the ragged kids running around to stop and do something like tuck in his shirt—he complies, then goes right on running and playing with the others. Then I am in the backyard of the house where I grew up. It has become a muddy, sloppy fenced pen and there are horses running around frantically. I overhear a snatch of conversation on a loud CB radio about one of the current occupants of the house: "...he kilt that feller..." I find several sticks that look like discarded trash; I pick them up to throw onto one of the many trash piles lying around. Second thought: maybe the people use these for something—they seem to be put together with nails or screws, pieces of wood joined crudely for an unfathomable purpose.

The crisis in our national educational system is old news—though I would prefer to call it a crisis of schooling, since education is distinct from what schools have been most loudly called upon to deliver. It is not only that schools, ill-equipped to bear the burden of the family's predicament, fail even in conveying to many of their students the basic skills of literate communication and calculation, so that students come out of school before they are enabled to lead responsible lives. There is a failure even more disturbing. A recent study by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching found that, after nearly a decade of research and reform, teachers' dissatisfaction with working conditions had actually increased. A large proportion of our teachers (thirty-eight percent) say they would not choose teaching as a career if they could choose again. Thomas Jefferson would be appalled at this statistic. Something is missing—some connection perhaps between the playing children and the crudely constructed sticks—and it is not being supplied by most of the current efforts to reform the American school. About the failure of reform efforts

at Taft High School in Chicago, one participant said: "Instead of focusing on what happens in classrooms, we spent time doing the logistics of restructuring." Tucking in our shirts. After a massive effort at reform in Littleton, Colorado, the school board, responding to community pressure, reinstated the 1984 requirements for graduation from high school. We may indeed need reform, the rethinking and restructuring of curricula and scheduling. But reform, as the word suggests, is a matter of reshaping or reorganizing materials already available. In a reformed room the furniture is rearranged within the shape given by the walls. What would it take to *transform* our living space, so that it provides us with new possibilities for being together with our communities' children, for engaging in the play of their lives? What would it take to *renew* our schooling, rather than trying to restore it to a supposed prelapsarian integrity?

"Tell me the landscape in which you live," says Ortega y Gasset, "and I will tell you who you are." As if the human landscape were not merely geography and climate, Ortega asks us for the contribution of who we are in what we see and how we experience. The landscape of schooling, not only a set of buildings or a creed of teaching techniques, might grow in the soil of who we are. But here are passages from a special section of *The Wall Street Journal*:

Across the curriculum, up and down the grade ladder, a new wave of teachers is casting out textbooks, cursing standardized tests, killing drills, and preaching a new creed of "engagement."

As school is usually set up, the kids are supposed to spit back to the teacher everything the teacher already knows. That would be considered a senseless waste of time in real life.¹

It seems that we are being rather tossed about. Not so long ago the new wave was rushing back to "basics" and to cultural literacy. At one end of the pen there is teaching "content," with its oft-derided goal of memorization and recall; and on the other end, what we call "discovery learning," with its presumed close connection to "real life."

A substantial body of research... has found that the traditional view of learning—in which teachers impart knowledge to passive students—is misguided. Rather, the studies have found, children learn by actively "constructing" knowledge based on what they already know, as well as on their environments.²

The horses must need more space, for the pen is muddy; our backyard is ruined. Maybe what matters, for us and for our students, is not what position we take but something else. Maybe whatever position we take up will work to quicken teaching if we take up this something along with it.

During the eleven years I taught junior and senior English courses at a small private preparatory school, attending the regular faculty team meetings at which we lamented students' difficulties and failures (both academic and behavioral), discussed possible remedies and occasionally implemented an effective one, my feeling grew that too much of the time we made no headway against the problem, as if, climbing a rope in the gymnasium, we had run out of arm strength before reaching the ceiling. But I am not out to provide remediation for teachers, as if bigger muscles would get us up the same rope to the top. I am out to provide for *teaching* as a distinct way of being that goes along with instruction. As it stretches and limbers other muscles, teaching becomes a different acrobatic. As it partakes of persons' commitment to each other, teaching is the poetry of encounter, the inventing of relatedness.

Searching the computer screen in front of us, my child asked me what my book was about. I caught his eye and told him: "It's about you." He thought for a moment and asked, hesitantly, hopefully: "...and Mommy?" I nodded. He brightened. "It's about all the people!" he exclaimed. I could have heard his beaming announcement as cuteness, precocity, or jabber: how does he know, at three and a half, what the book is about? How could one who cannot yet read, much less form conclusions logically, divine the purpose of a *book*? To be sure, at the moment of his jubilant insight, I was not called upon to judge whether he could support his opinion with reasons and evidence. But I did not in fact hear it as an accidental felicity; I heard it as if he were privy to my own most cherished intentions and hopes, as if in his most eloquent vocabulary he were giving voice to me. That moment was a gift: what gave it? Is a simple psychological explanation—a father's sentimental pride in his own son—all there is to it? I am interested in exploring how it is that Being flourishes when we be together. The word "parent" is from Latin *parere*, meaning to bring forth. Though I am the parent, I have no sense that anything I did, consciously or not, caused that moment of what was really heart-stopping communion. Then how was that moment brought forth?

Martin Buber would say that teaching has its life in the relation between people, a relation brought forth by speaking the "basic word I-You." In his view, only that speaking can elicit the whole being of man, can give him the sense of being fully alive in the present, can satisfy his hunger with moments that make a difference for his fellows. Here then is one of the epigraphs for this book, a message I shall be endeavoring to unpack so that its medium becomes ours:

Speech in its ontological sense was at all times present wherever men regarded one another in the mutuality of I and Thou; wherever one showed the other something in the world in such

a way that from then on he began really to perceive it; wherever one gave another a sign in such a way that he could recognize the designated situation as he had not been able to before; wherever one communicated to the other his own experience in such a way that it penetrated the other's circle of experience and supplemented it as from within, so that from now on his perceptions were set within a world as they had not been before. All this flowing ever again into a stream of reciprocal sharing of knowledge—thus came to be and thus is the living We, the genuine We, which, where it fulfills itself, embraces the dead who once took part in colloquy and now take part in it through what they have handed down to posterity.³

Buber speaks here of his central tenet, the primacy of dialogue, the “mutuality of I and Thou.” “All actual life,” he says elsewhere, “is encounter.” What does Buber mean by “encounter”? Before subject matter is handled between teacher and student, there is, generating the field in which the material is handled, this fact of encounter, of being together, a fact that immerses the concerns of information transfer, of memory, of calculation, of knowing, flooding them with meaning and value. In a small child's delighted sentences you can hear that the function of speaking is not just to refer to things. Speaking is belonging. Speaking brings the child into its family. But Buber calls it “ontological speech”: speaking that embodies family is also that which *generates world*. How is that? How does our landscape come from who we are?

In our inquiry here, we ask how a *teacher* speaks the basic word of relation, the ontological word “I-You”? What could that mean? How do we set the perceptions of another “within a world as they had not been before”? Buber speaks of such a fulfillment as a mysterious joining of will and grace, purpose and receptivity, like being in love. I believe there are steps we can take in its direction, a kind of speaking and listening that will fit us for encounter, for breakthrough. Listening with Buber, with Wittgenstein, and with Heidegger, we may be able to listen transitively—to invent in our listening an arena for being related, for sharing mastery, sharing apprenticeship. Though I have done my homework, trying to get the philosophical story as accurate as I can, its accuracy is not finally the point. I am inventing something here, something that bears on the teacher's way of being, on engagement in education, on the *sharing* of mastery. If I can engage you in the inventing, if I can get you to take it over from me, I will have succeeded. If you can hear and answer the song of myself—my enthusiasm, my naivety, my pride in sifting together philosophers, scientists, and poets, my cleverness, my love for my own parents and for the son that is a miraculous mirror of his father and of mine—then my inventing will have found its home. Where inventing finds its way home, beget-

ting its answering family, teaching/learning is present. If we are listening for it, these philosophers speak of an arena where teaching can assume its rightful magnitude in our culture.

Closer to home, there is another poet of facts, displayer and revealer and re-inventor of facts, another teacher who opens the world to our whole hearts. Here then is another epigraph for this book, from that song which contains the antithesis of selfishness:

This is the lexicographer, this the chemist, this made a grammar
of the old cartouches,
These mariners put the ship through dangerous unknown seas,
This is the geologist, this works with the scalpel, and this is a
mathematician.
Gentlemen, to you the first honors always!
Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling,
I but enter by them into an area of my dwelling.
Less the reminders of properties told my words,
And more the reminders they of life untold, and of freedom and
extrication...⁴

That is Walt Whitman at the opening of our century, inviting us to consider the possibility of that something beyond a staked-out position, something more like a poetry of dwelling together. We teachers use facts, but facts are not our dwelling. If we are to be poets of our students' school days, we need temptations for the muse.

Even closer to our lives as teachers, listen to Annie Dillard as she opens the possibility of living newly, jumping the past like a hopscotch square:

For it is not you or I that is important, neither what sort we might be nor how we came to be each where we are. What is important is the moment of opening a life and feeling it touch—with an electric hiss and cry—this speckled mineral sphere, our present world.⁵

While this book is written for an audience—dare I hope it?—of practising teachers, I envision also students in education courses, administrators, school boards, and by extension, anyone who has ever participated with the young in investigating the nature and possibilities of things. With all of you, I want to step for a moment beyond our professional identities and histories, our sorts and conditions and the circumstances we inherit, to engage in a colloquy concerning that moment when with students we open the present world to the touch of our living, and the hilly, rock-strewn field becomes our home backyard.

NOTES

1. *The Wall Street Journal*, September 11, 1992, B1.
2. *Education Week*, November 18, 1992.
3. *The Way of Response*, 108.
4. From *Song of Myself*.
5. From *An American Childhood*.