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The Teacher as Artist

I

One of the greatest although still unappreciated educators in twentieth-century America, Harold Rugg, first made me very much aware of “the teacher as artist.” Often preferring the term, “artist-teacher,” Rugg was not thinking in any literal way of the school appointee who is more or less “trained” to teach such conventional arts as music, graphics (painting and drawing, principally), dramatics, or even the dance. While he did not disparage any or all these arts — indeed, he encouraged them — Rugg conceived of artist-teachers in a far more striking, provocative sense. They become teachers able to transform classrooms from frequently miseducative, deadly routines into “studio” atmospheres of creative, vibrant involvement.

In this perspective, Rugg considered children themselves as the potential, living substances of art — the “raw material” of aesthetic experiences. In short, he saw young people as capable of imaginative responses to infinitely diverse, adventurous ways of developing new forms of learning and growing. Simultaneously, the teacher could be compared, although rather metaphorically, of course, to the portrait painter — as an artist who miraculously reshapes and reinterprets his own perceptions of a human figure out of the crude array of pigments smeared upon his palette.

But if the artist-teacher, in Rugg’s meaning, is to function with any degree of effectiveness, certain preconditions are essential. I am not sure as to precisely which of these preconditions Rugg would now emphasize most. I am fairly sure,

nevertheless, that he would have called attention to the obvious need for utmost flexibility in the way classrooms are structured (rows of seats rather than mobile groupings would not do); for an abundance of resource materials to which learners could turn freely (crayons, cardboard, wood blocks, scrap metal, cameras, classroom-made musical instruments, costume materials, props for stage settings, clay, stone, potter's wheels — plus an endless array of others); for participation by more than one teacher, more likely by a team of two or more, in helping cooperatively to design a mural or an outdoor sculpture, to produce a play, musicale, or dance recital, but, perhaps above all, for teachers who are not strictly "teachers of art" at all. For, as portrayed by Rugg, they become teachers who have discovered that any kind of creative education, hence any kind of creative human life, is concerned with the very core of human existence and thus of its survival, its evolution, its agonies, its aspirations.

II

Over a quarter-century has already passed since Rugg tried most persuasively to express such an image of the artist-teacher. Assuming its attractiveness, have we progressed conspicuously toward its achievement in practice? I very much fear that we have not. On the contrary, one may argue, although I would be happy to be contradicted, that we have regressed considerably further than we have progressed toward the image he drew. If so, reasons are too complex to review in detail: Sputnik, technocracy, moral as well as aesthetic confusion, sheer lethargy, the Cold War, "materialism" and "imperialism" — these are not only familiar explanations; each probably contributes its own share.

But, also, everyone of these conditions compounds our confusion more than they remove them just because not a single one of them is a *sufficient* condition. A supreme fallacy of our age (no less than of previous ages) is the fallacy of "simplism" or "reductionism." In less technical language, I mean only that most of us still practice "magic" oftener than "science" because, for one thing, most of us are likely to locate one primary "cause" behind all others, whether it be a "god," or a "dictator," or a "scapegoat," or any "ultimate cause" you or I may wish to conjure up.

The tragic neglect of education as art, and equally of art as education, is not, then, to be explained by any one condition. While each of those I have mentioned is contributive, each condition should be appraised in the context of others. Or, to make my point in quite another way, our crucial difficulty has been and remains that we have seldom conceived, much less discovered, artist-teachers in Rugg's encompassing sense, because the typical teacher of whatever field usually symbolizes the fragmentation of modern civilization. Like the latter, the teacher, too, is fragmented — a specialized segment of a vastly complex network of institutions, practices, and attitudes rarely synchronized with one another.

The age of specialization, in brief, has captured not only institutions, such as industry or government, but likewise institutions of the schools. Hence, as long as we avoid or circumvent one of the most difficult urgencies of our time — that is, to look upon human life as a hodgepodge of diverse, inharmonious pieces, of course we shall never begin to regard education as a unified, organic partnership of children, teachers, and communities. Just as races, classes, religions, homogeneous groupings, specialized "majors," or other divisive inventions of civilization, in general, or of education, in particular, continue to dominate our underlying assumptions of human atomization and segmentation, equally so will typical teachers of art continue to be stereotyped as mere fixtures of the educational establishment — a dubious luxury besides.

III

If Harold Rugg is right, however, the major premises upon which most contemporary education continues to be constructed are not only false and wrong — they are destructive and evil. These premises, which far too few teachers or even educational theorists still seriously question, conspire to box off and pigeon-hole human beings from one another. Actually such proliferations reflect and reinforce the human condition itself: in the name of question-begging "radical reform," often they help to split human life still further, even as do cultures and nations. Thereby they reinforce the isolation of generalists from specialists, "humanistic" educators from "expert" educators, scientists from artists, "high" IQs from "low" IQs.

Yet, every one of these divisive inventions is, Rugg would surely contend, spurious. The puny globe on which we live cannot survive more than a few more decades unless its most amazing of all accidents — the human species itself — discovers in time that it is the only species known in the universe that is still conceivably able to confront its own dangers and to prevent the final catastrophe that already threatens it.

What, then, are we really asking the artist-teacher and his students to undertake? Surely it is not to perpetuate, in the name of traditional curricula, the pathetically narrow and frequently irrelevant kinds of “courses” in music, drawing, or other arts that are still often imposed upon them. Quite contrary, the most crucial challenge that any artist-teacher has ever encountered is to recognize one obligation before all others: to enable young learners — that is, young citizens across the globe — to recognize that *they*, far more than any other group of citizens, have the heavy responsibility (may I say: perhaps the final responsibility?) to build the future of mankind in accordance with such common, trans-cultural values as peace, abundance, sharing, understanding, and love.

I write, of course, as a “philosopher of crisis,” and those who deny the assumptions upon which this contention is made should take issue with them. At this point, all that I am capable of emphasizing is, with Rugg, that the artist-teacher holds a master key to contemporary education. Either this kind of teacher (regardless of his “field”) will join with his like-minded colleagues in attacking and reversing “the upside-down curriculum” that dominates education today, or he and we are all going to be victimized. The supreme purpose of education, notwithstanding our brilliant apologists of science as education, is *not* crucially to prepare experts in behalf of the technological establishment. The purpose is fundamentally *aesthetic*: to develop in young people their own capacities to shape, to reshape, human life in its multiple dimensions — scientific or technological, yes, but also much more than either.

Here, indeed, even Rugg’s far-reaching conception appears too confined. When he wrote and taught, he still viewed teachers and curricula perhaps more in terms of formalized functions than in terms of the *educative* process as at least equally a *cultural* process. In such a wider sense, the artist-teacher may now be interpreted even more appropriately as a participant in the renewal of community experience itself. For

his "studio" becomes fused with the daily life of people who are, above all, creators and re-creators of their own future.

IV

Can current education begin to approximate the norm that Rugg himself anticipated? I do not know. I do question seriously whether Canadian education as yet touches more than the periphery of that norm. Yet I would be happy to be convinced that the schools of Canada can and should become powerful, dramatic expressions of education as the creations of a multicultural people — expressions to be emulated in many other countries.

But permit me to strike a more positive note. Although I am the first to insist that my knowledge of public education in Canada is extremely superficial, I am afraid I must defend Rugg's contention that the artist-teacher remains far more an idealized model than a reality of daily practice in or out of the school. Even if correct, however, need this judgment prove inevitable? The great purpose of *any* teacher is that of respect for and confidence in the expectations and aspirations of every single one of his students. Until this attitude is internalized, nothing else of great value can happen. I have always believed in my students, not only because they are ordinary human beings, but because they are possessors of tremendous capacities for both self-criticism and social-criticism, for both self-expression and social-expression.

In this sense, too, the artist-teacher is not so much to be valued as a painter or musician as he is the moulder, the remoulder, of whatever latent resources of imagination and originality any child, yours or mine, possesses. Yet how often do we, as teachers, ignore these resources! Let us then recognize, as Rugg persistently recognized, that one of the chief reasons for this ignorance is our reluctance to admit that the frustrating, stifling, consequences of aesthetic potentialities in children are not so much attributable to children themselves as they are traceable to the neglect of their own various cultural environments. No artist-teacher, if this qualification is as valid as I contend it is, can therefore perform his role effectively unless or until he dedicates much of his energy and his commitment to frequent involvement in exactly those environments.

Let me conclude with a few questions directed primarily to the teachers of art in Canada:

To what extent are you concerned with the local subcultural patterns of your own students? Do you visit their homes and neighborhoods? Do you try to associate with their families and peers? Do you encourage their parents, in turn, to share in planning and developing programs or projects that convey and express their proud subcultural experiences?

To what extent do you, as an art teacher in music, graphics, or others, enlist fellow-teachers in social studies, literature, science, industrial arts, or still further areas by looking toward cross-disciplinary ventures in learning and teaching? Conversely, to what extent do they enlist you?

To what extent do you utilize the community itself as a "studio"? This does not, of course, mean occasional "field trips" to museums. It means, rather, first-hand participation in the unbelievably rich resources of Canada — not only the French, English, or others of European stock, but also the Indian, Eskimo, Negro, and all others. Are the public schools adequately utilizing and relating such resources both in the school and in the community?

Finally, to what extent can any teacher in Canada become an artist-teacher in some of the ways that Rugg urged *all* teachers to become? What do you think?