Seeing Violence in my Teaching

by

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"Education is a form of violence," J. Krishnamurti wrote twenty-five years ago. A philosopher and spiritual teacher, Krishnamurti said that traditional education imposed ideas on students, violating their beliefs by suppressing and controlling them. He encouraged his readers and listeners to find ways that were nonviolent. He advised us to avoid "thinking in opposites"; for instance, if I've taught poorly one week, I attack the image of myself as a good teacher, and I replace it with the thought I am a bad teacher. This inward violence, imposing what should be on what is, creates conflicts and breeds antagonism rather than encouraging growth and understanding of ourselves and others. Krishnamurti suggested teaching and learning by simply "being attentive" and accepting new ideas by not having to destroy previous beliefs.

That's a nice goal but one I easily forget when I return to school on Monday morning, and I spot Michael and Aaron passing their basketball magazines during my "Using Vivid Verbs" explanation.

"Give it to me!" I say, noting my use of a non-vivid verb. I also notice I am suppressing behavior opposite of what I want. Is this what Krishnamurti meant? If so, I have little hope of teaching nonviolently. Is violence the discipline imposed by society, making students act politely when they really are not? Or is violence the result of a student rebelling against what is?

I felt good about my teaching last year. Things fit together, my grammar and usage instruction balanced well with weekly writing assignments. My students seemed enthused with their reading. I felt good encouraging and at the same time challenging my students with a variety of activities that have ranged from imaging exercises to group publication assignments. I liked the depth of thinking in my students' responses; they had written vividly of their memories and thoughtfully of our discussions. And I liked how I had taught mythology by connecting it to our spiritual, artistic, and philo-

sophical histories, using for the first time Joseph Campbell's books and videos to help students find personal value in studying "ancient stuff."

But I had my critics. Mrs. Cameron thought I had been teaching poorly. Before midyear she removed her daughter from my class, Advanced English 9. This was after denouncing my teaching in a specially called conference with the principal, her daughter's counselor, her daughter, and me. Mrs. Cameron complained that her daughter was not learning to write in class because we had not yet studied and practiced writing correct sentences. But more importantly, she did not like her daughter being forced to learn "New Age" ideas from people like Joseph Campbell. "I can see it maybe when they get to college," she said, "but it's too much to ask from high school freshmen to apply those ideas."

Mrs. Cameron was especially upset with my use of imaging exercises in which I guide students in using their imaginations to visualize past memories. She turned to the principal and said, "I've been told that last week there was a student in Mr. Ingalls' class who cried during it. I also have been told that such activities are strictly illegal in Fairfax County Public Schools."

I did not argue with Mrs. Cameron and politely told her that her daughter, Melissa, would be welcome back to my class when the curriculum suited her. I also said I would not be changing my teaching; I valued Campbell's ideas and imaging exercises, both of which were entirely legal to use. Fortunately, my principal knew this and was not worried about student crying.

I felt strange after that conference. I wondered if my eyes were bulging out like those of Nostradamus in the demonic pictures on the New Age book covers. Did B. Dalton and Crown Books have Joseph Campbell in the New Age section of their stores? I pictured how threatening my teaching had been over the months to this woman who expected high school to teach corrections and facts. Did
other parents mistrust me? Were ninth graders too young or too innocent for me? Was I violating their beliefs?

I questioned my teaching decisions, particularly the one to connect Campbell’s thoughts on mythology with the imaging we were doing. I guessed that if I had kept these ideas separate, the conference with Mrs. Cameron would not have taken place. I taught students how psychology and mythology were interwoven, but this seemed to have violated at least one family’s religious or personal beliefs. I considered how I could adjust my teaching to various family interests and beliefs. Then I recalled my previous year of teaching and my 14-year-old critic, Yoo Sook.

Two years ago I also thought I was teaching Advanced English 9 pretty well. Then at the beginning of the fourth quarter, Yoo Sook — one of my best achieving students as well as one of my favorites, whom I had berated for failing to do her work for a second consecutive day — stormed out of class yelling, “F--- you, Mr. Ingalls!” Later in a conference, Yoo Sook complained that my class had been a “waste of time” and that she had “hardly learned anything all year.”

Yoo Sook hurt me. Later she apologized to me and to the class, but she remained frustrated with the class even though her classmates argued on my behalf. When I pressed her for an explanation, she was confused about her outburst and uneasy to tell me more.

In June I reconsidered my teaching of mythology in light of Yoo Sook’s frustrations. I saw how the historical facts bored my students while the few mystical aspects we discussed fascinated them.

Yoo Sook helped me change my teaching. I decided last year to add more spiritual content and teach that which fascinated me. I made Joseph Campbell the focus of my mythology unit, and I used Carl Jung to connect those lessons to what we were studying in literature and what we were discovering in imaging exercises. I encouraged students to write about their own spiritual ideas, and I openly responded to their questions about my own. And I have challenged students in various ways to apply these ideas in their reading responses. I know I am a better teacher because of Yoo Sook’s outburst. And I like to think that these changes would have satisfied Yoo Sook and allowed her to understand herself better.

Recalling my experience with Yoo Sook dispelled some uncertainty about my teaching and helped me understand Krishnamurti’s ideas about nonviolent education. If I had ever been violent, it had been last year, not because of what I did, but because of what I didn’t do. I lacked experience teaching Advanced English 9, so I taught what I should, emphasizing the parts, not the whole. If I continued teaching this way, I would be violent in the same way as Mrs. Cameron is to her daughter. She wanted me to teach her daughter the facts about literary history, the “seen reality,” and never touching on the deeper sense of life or risking serious emotional reactions. In her mind learning to write is correcting what is seen, like inconsistent verb tense and misplaced modifiers. And studying mythology is memorizing myths. Rather than having education help her daughter understand her unconsciousness, she wants education to correct social problems, to teach stories but not to study what they mean to us. Education is to deal with the concrete, not the unknown or the metaphorical, nor our links with the eons of humanity. She expects schools to reinforce family bonds and social norms by ignoring troubling questions and keeping concepts in small pieces that can safely be controlled.

I understand Krishnamurti’s advice better after these experiences. I have to “be attentive.” If I teach in ways that are not akin with the human spirit, then I am violating my students’ minds, denying them something of themselves. Don Gallehr said, “We make meaning when we make connections, when we mix experiences and ideas. Unconnected, our experiences and ideas remain inert.” When I can’t show students how to connect their experiences with what I teach, I am suppressing them and breeding antagonism.

I would rather face worried parents than deny students the chance to learn what they thirst for — that which often transcends this existence and speaks to our deeper side. It is violent to teach what we don’t believe and justify lessons by calling them curriculum, bending to social pressure and failing to teach what will help children understand themselves.

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