EXCELLENCE AND THE BASICS

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We are at risk. We are endangered, they say. By what? By mediocrity, by Japan's "fifth generation" computers and the knowledge power they presumably contain, by losing economic primacy in the world, by our debt to foreign interests, by our deficits, by becoming — despite missiles and lasers — vulnerable to attack. Confronting threats that evoke a latent paranoia, we have on previous occasions identified a single cause and conceived a simple remedy — more often than not one having to do with school achievement. Sometimes it has been progressive education that worried us; sometimes neglect of the 3 Rs or the "basics"; or indifference to spiritual values; or (and this is the best, the most easily deployed) declining test scores. But below the surface, more often than not, there have been more fundamental, vaguer fears — of critical thinking and the unrest that might follow, of contempt for the verities, of ignorance of the essentials, of a felt destabilization of society due to attempts to equalize.

Since the evidence of decline in achievement is questionable (granting the importance of more attention to mathematics and science), I think we have to view what is being proposed with a clear sense of context and be careful not to lose sight of what we say we cherish and of what we actually know. It is a good thing to have the spotlight turned on education again and a good thing to spark a national dialogue; but it must not be a dialogue whose terms are set by commissions and media; nor should it be infused with false promises, unsupported generalizations or cliches. It ought to be the kind of public dialogue that allows for the articulation of multiple vantage points and diverse commitments, even as it takes into account longings not easily allayed: for security, community, virtue, and the reassuring tokens of old sustaining faiths. Not only do we hear little of pluralism in the reports; we hear nothing of ethical concerns and moral perplexities. There are merely nods in the direction of equity and fairness; I am not sure if justice is mentioned at all. No serious
attention is paid to art experiences or image stores or to the role of imagination. Nothing thoughtful is said about individual pursuits of possibility, or about the kind of human connection once described as "making music together." "Merit," yes, left cautiously undefined; "high standards," yes; "common learnings" rendered as a list of basics rather than as general education; "time," yes, treated as a plastic substance to be extruded, stretched, cut up into particles, tied to tasks, no longer treated as duration, as a stream carrying the traces of the past, flowing toward what is not yet.

The "return to basics" movement, with its emphasis on minimum competencies, performance, and the rest, was a peculiar regression, an effort to reconcile demands for equity with the persistent desire for the easy solutions of earlier times — the 3 Rs of recollected childhood, free of frills, uncomplicated, measurable and manageable. Equality could be seen as the lowest common denominator, output could be measured against input, and schools would be assembly lines validated by quality controls as a rationale for the withdrawal of federal funds — especially those used for remediation, what was called "affective education" and (worst of all) value education. We began to hear talk of "maximum competences," mutterings about excellence linked to cognition, about the softening effects of government support; and there was a subtext, indicating that we could not be equal and excellent too. Also, I think that the factory and assembly line paradigm was becoming anomalous, what with the sudden upsurge of images of a high-tech society, the corporate pressure to computerize, new and shiny visions of efficiency (with grim pictures of closing factories in the background, not to speak of disappearing unions), and a conception of effectiveness linked to good management, requiring no intervention or supports from above. In this "fifth generation" new world, the assembly line mentality was a liability. The newly minted social reality needed newly minted, technically and cognitively oriented schools, staffed by teachers superior to those just barely able to teach the basics, with curricula evocative (at least on the surface) of traditional education — and of something called excellence, linked somehow to the humanism of a Jefferson, an Erasmus, a Cardinal Newman,
even an Aristotle, names that might make people nod gravely, even if they scarcely recognized them. I was rather pleased to note Irving Howe's comment of this Spring: "The very word 'excellence' ought to make us cringe a little, so thoroughly has it been assimilated to the prose styles of commission reports, letters of recommendation, and hair spray commercials." He said it was being used as a code word for educational Reaganism, which he associated with tougher testing, increased discipline, and merit pay — and fundamentally anti-humanistic in much that it implied.

How might we create the idea of excellence as a significant value? For me, it refers to a quality of mind; and, when I say "mind," I think as John Dewey did of something other than an immaterial substance or a computational device. Dewey thought of mind as a verb, not a noun, a verb denoting the ways in which "we deal consciously and expressly with the situations in which we find ourselves." Mind signifies attention, he said, and purpose. "Mind is care in the sense of solicitude — as well as active looking after things that need to be tended...." Conceived that way, mind is involved with experience and lived situations. It has to do with the funding of meanings, all sorts of meanings, which become part of and constitute the self. They compose the background against which new encounters and new experience are projected; and to educate is, in a very fundamental sense, to add to the richness and multiplicity of such meanings. They include much more than true-and-false meanings. As Dewey said, there are moral and poetic meanings. And I would add the meanings some people achieve when they realize they are capable of repairing what is deficient and painful, solving complex social problems, altering — to some degree — the order of things. Whatever the meanings — those achieved through the study of history or literature or the sciences or art or social action — they stem from our ability to look at our lived situations through lenses provided by our predecessors or contemporaries, to construct our realities socio-centrically, if you like, on the ground of our tacit awarenesses, our bodily and intuitive and perceptual grasp of things. It is the quality of our constructing, our
sense-making, the care we take, the attentiveness to how the ordering might take place and ought to take place that may warrant a value term like "excellent."

Thinking of mind that way, and of individual vantage point and perspective as well, we might also think of what Howard Gardner calls "frames of mind," meaning multiple intelligences, meaning types of know-how potential in the plurality of human beings: logical-mathematical intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, musical intelligence, a great variety of personal intelligences. This might lead us to think of the varieties of mindfulness with which persons may direct their attention or make use of their intelligences as they strive to make sense of their worlds.

One of my concerns has to do with a narrowing that might be a consequence of the recent reports, a channeling of human possibility. If stress is placed on a prescribed range of literacies, if people are thought of primarily as resources to promote the national interest, opportunities for differential growth and development may be severely limited — especially for those whose capacities are not so prized today. I think of the Thoreaus of today, the Margaret Fullers, the Helen Caldecotts, the James Baldwins — of people peculiarly qualified to start storefront schools in inhospitable areas, those out to save the rivers, those who engaged in civil disobedience to stop nuclear war. I know that there has often been tension in our history between those who espouse a single mode of achievement and bearing — and those who celebrate the richness of multiplicity, and, in the public dialogue I hope we can develop, I hope the tension drowned out by the reports can be kept alive. We do not want to forget that there are always newcomers in this country — with different cultures, accents, standards, and capacities. And there is always the child with the talent to plant peculiar gardens and hybridize flowers, or the ability to help the blind, or to repair a car as no one can....

There is a warrant for thinking of excellence in a plural sense if we think of capacities that are relevant in various ways to the different kinds of intelligence, when occasions are provided that give those intelligences free play. These capacities include
critico-creative thinking, for instance, integrity, fidelity, imaginativeness, adventurousness, self-reflectiveness, cooperativeness, moral sensitivity, autonomy. We can speak of being critico-creative with respect to music, even as we can in relation to logic and mathematics. Imaginativeness has a part to play in science as it surely does where literary intelligence and the several arts are concerned. But people differ in the capacities they might develop—as they differ in the degree of intelligence they display within the various frames. Obviously it means little to speak of critico-creative thinking or any other capacity without taking into account the ways in which different capacities may find expression in recognizable modes of activity: solving problems in mathematics, decoding and achieving meaning in a short story, interpreting media messages, choreographing a dance, responding to threats to the environment, organizing a literacy program, devising a program for a microcomputer, testing a hypothesis in molecular biology, keeping a log, even mastering a remedial exercise. And, of course, we can think of how such capacities might be displayed or ought to be displayed in and through the subject matter areas or the disciplines emphasized in so many of the reports.

They are not likely to be displayed, however, if — instead of emphasizing discrete skills or competencies — we cannot learn and empower teachers to learn that the important thing is to communicate ways of doing things, ways that can be played with and elaborated by students striking out on their own — trying out the modes of procedure that have helped others inhabit and make sense of various fields of knowledge, and eventually teaching themselves. Whether one is a beginning ballet dancer being stringently trained in the rudiments of the dance, or a mathematics student being introduced to the languages of math, the first thing is to learn the skills that must become habitual, the basic modes of knowing-how, the knacks, the ways of proceeding — and to attend from those basic ways to the actual activity, the display of capacities. As the ballet dancer, after drilling, then trying out what she has learned by trying out her exercises (her positions before the mirror), — gradually enters the community of ballet dancers — or as the math student, having
mastered the multiplication table and learned how to divide, having tried out those skills in his/her own way — moves on, without having to think of the tables any longer, to solving actual problems, teaching himself/herself what he/she has not been taught. Similar things may happen when persons are introduced into the provinces of meaning we identify as the various disciplines, offering distinctive perspectives — historical, scientific, sociological, literary — on experience, only conceivable when individuals (working from their own vantage points, out of their own tacit awarenesses) learn to incarnate particular cognitive styles, learn the protocols, exercise the relevant capacities in learning how to learn.

I want to emphasize process, growth, possibility, a diversity of ways of being in the world, a regard for the possibility of multiple excellences. I want to suggest that, in a pluralist country committed to the values of diversity as well as to the values of the common, in a country ostensibly committed to raised achievement levels (and these, too, may be variously defined), we cannot constrict our view of the human potential and allow only a limited expression in response to extrinsic demands. We hear often enough about passivity and privatism and malaise and poverty. We hear about the enormous difficulty involved in discovering commitment, in countering meaninglessness and prevalent anomie. Yes, I know there is the apparent promise and the fascination of computers; yes, I have been learning about the intoxication with video, with violence, with MTV. I know the ever-present seductions of media, of consumerist images. But there is more, so much more for us to be concerned about — in the interest of what is called the learning society, in the interest of democracy, in the interest of the living person and his/her awareness, his/her wide-awakeness, his/her growth.

There is no knowing the range of potential that exists if we never break through the predefined, if we do not (at least now and then) look at things as if they could be otherwise, if we do not hold in mind the image of a better social order so as to know what is lacking today. That is why I call so much for multiple literacies — and literacy, for me, in whatever domain, has to do with the capacity to speak, read, interpret, make connections,
to think about what one is doing, to mind in the sense of "care and solicitude" — and to do
all this against one's own ground in the intersubjective world, in the light of one's own
intuitive grasping of the way things are. Yes, language literacy is all important — written
and spoken language (I cannot sufficiently stress the need to create speech situations in
which people can speak directly to one another, finding out what they think by putting it
into spoken words), and mathematical literacy, and scientific and technological literacy, if
they involve the ability, not only to master protocols and techniques but to take
responsibility for them, to attend to their consequences for the quality of human lives.
Important, too, is aesthetic literacy, the ability to engage with works of art, to deal with
artifacts, to recognize quality and form and beauty, to build an image store as ground. And
there is what might be called ethical literacy, the capacity to recognize what is deficient,
to care about what is decent, life sustaining, and humane — and to take action to bring into
being that which one conceives to be right and about which one cares. Not least, there is
the need to create and recreate the common — through enhanced political or civic literacy,
the ability to come together with others in concert — to come together in order to choose,
to move together, to build. I want still to believe there is a teachable capacity to bring into
being an "articulate public" — and that the most significant excellences are discovered when
people appear before one another to bring something into being between themselves. It must
be something they hold in common and something always in process — something nourished
by many voices, many perspectives. It is in such making of a human world, I think, that
excellence comes into its own.