

Education and Disarmament

MAXINE GREENE

Teachers College, Columbia University

I want to begin by quoting from three people who remember a day in 1945. They all lived in Hiroshima, and their words are collected in the book *Unforgettable Fire*, along with pictures they have drawn.

Standing on the hill I could see the shrine at its foot engulfed in flames and Shukkeien Garden burning between two branches of the Ota River. The fire extended to the Hiroshima Castle. Above the city was a mushroom cloud from the Atomic Bomb.¹

A girl was standing in the middle of the road staring vacantly. . . . She was eight years old. The wound on her head looked like a cracked pomegranate. Silently I carried her on my back. . . . Then I heard a girl's voice clearly from behind a tree. "Help me, please." Her back was completely burned and the skin peeled off and was hanging down from her hips.²

The next morning at 7:30 I started from school toward the ruins of my house. . . . There were few people to be seen in the scorched field. I saw for the first time a pile of burned bodies in a water tank by the entrance to the broadcasting station. Then I was suddenly frightened by a terrible sight on the street 40 to 50 meters from Shukkeien Garden. There was a charred body of a woman standing frozen in a running posture with one leg lifted and her baby tightly clutched in her arms. Who on earth could she be? The cruel sight still vividly remains in my mind.³

I read these accounts of what they remember; I stare at the drawings; and I think that this was all the doing of ordinary human beings in positions of power—presumably decent, patriotic human beings caught up in strategic and technical thinking, *choosing* to drop an atomic bomb. I recall John Dewey talking about an "unregenerate Adam" in each living person, of Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamasov declaring that "anything is possible." There is no way of demonstrating that cruelty and sadism and distancing are unnatural or even nonhuman. Nor are there any guarantees that an address to people's "better nature" or what is generalized as "conscience" or even their intelligence will avert atomic war or institute justice on the earth.

That is why education is so crucial; and by education I do not necessarily mean schooling, although I still believe that the public schools have the potential for becoming places where persons can be released to think,

communicate with one another, discover what it might be like to live in a community with an enlarging circle of human beings, all grounded in the same world, but each a distinctive subject with a distinctive life story and a voice of his or her own. The fact that public schools so rarely succeed in this today has, I believe, a great deal to do with the same situation that makes a special issue on disarmament necessary. There are too many violations in this society; too many instances of neglect; too many acceptances of presumably deserved inequities; too many stock responses to a crucially altered world.

In my view, education ought to be thought of as the kind of activity that releases all sorts of human beings to reach out from their own places, their own locations in the world, to make sense of what they live and what they encounter around themselves. I put great emphasis on the importance of persons' being present to the educative situation—personally present, empowered to interpret (with the aid of the schemata, the constructs provided by their predecessors and contemporaries) their experience. Reality, as I understand it, *is* interpreted experience; and I would want to put much more stress on the process of interpretation than is ordinarily done, so that young people become to some degree self-reflective about the ways there are of making sense. When I speak of schemata and constructs, I am thinking of the modes of explanation and ordering derived in large measure from the disciplines: history and geography and physics and mathematics and the rest. I am thinking of the concepts that offer clusters of meaning as well, concepts that have their own history.

Let me give one example of what I mean by reflectiveness with respect to interpretation and sense-making. As very young children, we were all introduced to the concept of discovery, one of the principles of explanation common in American history. Today, most of us are aware that the term "discovery" is highly questionable. We know that when Columbus landed on Hispaniola, human beings with a highly developed culture already lived there, although he was incapable of ascribing to them any humanity or even language; and we know that his aim was not truly to discover but to extend the European quest for territory and exploitation to what he thought was the Far East. Surely it is necessary today, not only to make this clear to children, but to enable children to reflect on the terms in use for describing and explaining what happened in the past, and obviously in the present too. To talk of nations or structures instead of people; to use words like "victory" and "defeat"; to talk about a "great war"; to deal uncritically with "heroism" and "martial law": All this is to distort and to falsify, if attention is not drawn to the interpretive process itself.

But there is more. I happen to be much impressed by Hannah Arendt's words about "newcomers" becoming part of a plurality or community,⁴ and I have been moved to see the process of learning in terms of beginnings rather than in terms of end points and objectives, in large measure because the notion of beginnings carries with it a notion of initiatives freely taken and of freedom

to imagine future possibility. I believe that, in peace education, the idea of beginnings is especially important. This is partly because it focuses attention on living human beings, feeling their particularity and concreteness, reaching out from their own situations, their own vantage points, to make sense of their lived worlds. At the horizon of those lived worlds, I like to think, is the larger world; and there must be some sense of continuity between the lived and the conceived if people are not to become purely technical thinkers. To be a technical thinker is to posit a wholly objective, "given" reality outside the self, a reality that is there to be exploited and manipulated, that is not susceptible to human reconceptualization and renewal. In some degree, I am talking about a ground for the learning process, an awareness of personal responsibility for the pursuit of meanings and truths. It seems crucial to me that young people become reflective about the fact that all knowledge—be it the precise knowledge of the natural sciences that makes predictions possible, be it the less precise knowledge of the social sciences—is gained from a particular location in the world, gained by a particular human being or a group of human beings responding to certain kinds of human interests. It seems crucial that they come to realize that no living being is capable of absolute certainty, because all knowing is perspectival, and no description or rendering can be absolutely final or complete. I also have in mind the need to resist positivism, or the modeling of all knowing after empirical knowing, the split between subject and object, the division of values from facts.

Of course clarity is important, as are regard for the evidence, and the hypothetical attitude, and critical responsiveness. But there is an overriding tendency in these days, ever since science lost its innocence and linked up in so many ways with an ever-expanding technology, to connect what we used to regard as open-ended experimental inquiry to the interest in technical control. When this, in turn, is associated with a spurious ideal of neutrality, when values are set aside and social consequences disregarded, it becomes all too easy to train an entire public in predominantly technical thinking. When this is done, it becomes a simple matter for the mass to use as criteria such norms as effectiveness and payoff and, after a while, to accept such notions as that of Alexander Haig when he opposes self-interest and military efficacy to human rights or technical superiority to what he calls our "feelings" about apartheid.

Although I was asked to write about the "fundamental objectives of disarmament education," I find it more meaningful to discuss ways of seeing, ways of knowing, ways of being located in the world. I am more interested in educating critical and self-reflective men and women, with commitments to values, than I am in equipping them with certain competencies, skills, even certain kinds of information. It is the way of being in the world and engaging with the world that is important. The danger lies in people's becoming accommodated to the idea of an objectively existent reality, defined by others, usually official others, and taking that reality for granted. Why else are people

so ready to accept the mapping of the world into superpower spheres of interest? Why is it so hard to see alternatives to a superpower confrontation over the Falklands, let us say, or Nicaragua, or El Salvador?

Related to the idea of critically reflective interpretation is the idea of interconnectedness, of the totality of things. There is a kind of specialization, as we well know, that fragments the world and compartmentalizes vision. It is the kind that makes it increasingly difficult to envisage the overlaps, the connections, the consequences that make all the difference. Wendell Berry, for one, speaks eloquently about the connections between mindless exploitation of the land, neglect of civil rights, military thinking, and technical approaches to the problems of life.⁵ The *New Yorker* some time ago provided an example of the same ways of thinking when the writer of "Notes and Comments" took issue with the Reagan administration's notion of states' rights and David Stockman's comment that he could not see why a Michigan taxpayer should pay for subways in New York. After talking about the ills of the subways, the writer remarked that "they might have been cured easily at an early stage and now require major surgery." He went on:

The profit from the newly "deregulated" industry is paid for with the illness of the people whose health is ruined by the resulting poisonous emissions. The person who is thrown off the food-stamp rolls shows up again on the welfare rolls. The town that is being polluted today has to be evacuated twenty years from now. The student who drops out of college because his loan was cancelled is less productive in his work for the rest of his life.⁶

And, at the end of the comment, the writer said: "Somewhere along the line, the very idea of society seems to have got lost, and one is left with a picture of the country as a collection of wholly self-interested, wholly rivalrous individuals, who are unacquainted with any notion of the common good." There is an interesting suggestion here that there is a connection between value consciousness and the ability to see things in interrelationships. It seems to me that what is now being said about the importance of a core curriculum connects with this, if that core curriculum is pervaded by some sense of worthwhile questions and if it is geared to the understanding of the lived situations of those being empowered to learn. There is no place for what C. P. Snow called, in another connection, "two cultures" when the consequences of technical decisions are so likely to affect the very lives of human beings all over the world. At the very least, there must be some understanding of what nuclear war signifies and some comprehension of the possibility of arms control.

I happen to be particularly interested in the role of the arts, especially encounters with the arts, in the learning process. One reason is that informed awareness of works of literature or paintings or plays provides a heightened sense of place, a sense of being in the world. In addition, engagement with a

Melville work of fiction or a Goya painting or a Tom Stoppard play may offer a sense of alternative realities, a recognition that things can be other than they are. Another reason is that aesthetic experiences may lead to a recovery, as one writer put it, of a person's lost spontaneity—meaning that they may enable us to see through our own eyes, to break with stereotypes and stock responses and automatisms. There is also the fact that we have to be present, personally present, to works of art if we are to constitute them as meaningful; and that is likely to overcome the abstractness as well as the passivity that is fostered by so many of the forces in our time. And, indeed, to see things in their interconnectedness, to put the severed parts together, to create patternings and networks in experience, is also a charge to break with passivity, with the terrible receptivity that is being fostered by the media. We are all aware that the passive gaze has become the hallmark of our time. The incapacity to deal critically with media makes even war movies and science fiction films in some manner mystifying: They oversimplify drastically; they feed our illusions of attaining total control. I want to see persons becoming agents rather than consumers. I want to see them becoming engaged in action, not behavior. I want them to initiate their own integrations, to identify relationships and consequences, to endow their own worlds with meaning and thus give purpose to their lives.

I remember Reverend William Sloane Coffin talking about the connections between defense spending and the loss of an urban job corps, and of what might follow from increasing adolescent unemployment in the cities. I see connections between the desire to pile up nuclear arms and unnecessary cruise missiles and, oddly enough, the campaign against abortion in Congress and the cuts in spending for mental health research and education and integration and bilingualism. It is only as we see the connections (in the light of imagined alternatives) that we will be able to bring persons together to struggle against all the violations that are being perpetuated: violations of human rights, violations of the right to choose, violations of civil liberties. They are all related, and we are false to ourselves if we do not enable young people to discover that this is so, to question, to interrogate—even the easy lives they feel entitled to live. David Stockman, you recall, has questioned the claim that the poor are “entitled” to support and financial aid. He and his associates have never questioned the taken-for-granted sense of entitlement that pervades the nation: the belief that we are entitled to eat more, consume more, use more energy, live better than any other people on earth.

The relation between self-understanding and understanding of these larger issues reminds me of something Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, when he was discussing the importance of self-awareness and the consciousness of the self as something more than an object. Rather, he said, it is the source of a particular way of seeing, of confronting the objectness of the world. He stressed the fact that the meanings of things are always generated by consciousness. It is not simply that “it is I who confer on the alarm clock its

exigency" (that I apprehend the alarm as a summons because it refers to my possibility of going to work). "It is man," he wrote, "who renders cities destructible, precisely because he posits them as fragile and as precious and because he adopts a system of protective measures with regard to them."⁷ Unlike earthquakes and eruptions, he was saying, destruction is a human thing. I find this to be of enormous significance, especially when I hear people treating bombs or invasions or instances of starvation as if they were natural occurrences, or when people ask (when reminded how important it is to pay heed to the napalmed child or the bombed schoolhouse or the bodies strewn in a town square) whether they are to bleed for every person killed in the Italian earthquake or some such catastrophe. Somehow it has to be made clear that nature is random, that the sky is indifferent—that, if there are to be justice and decency in the world, they have to be deliberately introduced by human beings. As Albert Camus suggested in *The Plague*, the point is not to become an accomplice of the world's injustice. The idea is to remain vigilant, consciously vigilant, against statistical thinking and distancing and carelessness and abstractness, all of which he associated with the plague.⁸ We have to begin early, I believe, in education to communicate the understanding that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Dresden and London and Pearl Harbor and Hanoi were in no way accidental, that they were the result of human decisions and human trade-offs. The young must be brought to see that those instances of destruction would not have happened if certain persons in the world were not deliberately transmuted into objects for other people, means to other people's ends; if wealth and resources had not been transferred from social utilities to the manufacture of weapons stockpiles; if those in power had not decided it was preferable to destroy rather than to seek out spheres of negotiation, to kill rather than to relieve hunger and heal and build.

Clearly, a value consciousness must be fostered wherever education takes place. This means a sensitivity to lacks and deficiencies in the world around—and a willingness to take action to repair. Moral education demands much more than exercise in moral reasoning. Indeed, it involves a consciousness of principles—standards, norms, imperatives—that govern the way people choose to live together. Classrooms ought to be visibly norm-governed, in the sense that those engaged in teaching and learning talk about what it means to live together according to identifiable principles: freedom, let us say, decency, rationality. There ought to be a clear recognition of differences and what the alternatives are to living lives in accord with some conceptions of the "ought." It is a matter of incarnating such principles for the sake of living with others and for the sake of giving each individual life some sense. These principles provide perspectives; they allow persons to pick out what is relevant in situations when they make their choices. When, for example, a city like Memphis builds a roadblock that prevents black citizens from driving through a white neighborhood on their way home at night, a person who has incarnated a principle of fairness or equity cannot but recognize that as a

situation that is fundamentally humiliating and unfair. When domination exists in school, when there is a "hidden curriculum" that enforces tracking and compliance, those who have become committed to what they understand by freedom or by self-determination are likely to perceive the situation as one that is morally wrong. Without some sense of "oughtness," deficiencies are almost never recognized; there is a kind of blank equivalence. Things simply are what they are.

But is not a matter of principle alone. It is a question of empowering young people to recognize particular situations as those that make demands on them, demands that they take some kind of action in the light of what they cherish, what they hold dear. Moral situations never come labeled; they have to be posited as situations that hold alternatives, that can be transcended and surpassed. It may be that the sense of injustice ought to be nurtured (with respect, say, to what happened at Hiroshima, what is happening in El Salvador today). It may be that human mutuality and friendship must be deliberately fostered. What seems crucial is that young people learn what it is, not simply to know and to feel, but to act: to break through what appear to be limiting situations; to find it in some sense existentially unbearable to tolerate injustice and violations and unwarranted pain. Without confrontations of this sort when they are young (and some of them may be experienced by means of encounters with art and literature), people—even purportedly virtuous people—are likely to grow up as purely abstract thinkers, reasoning well, knowing what is "right," but remaining incapable of deeply felt concern. To care when one is young, to learn what it means to be fair and to regard others' integrity and welfare, to constitute the world somehow in terms of compassion and concern, is to develop the capability of reaching beyond the immediate and the local. It may be to develop the capability to imagine a world that is truly just—a world in which bombings and torture and violations of human beings become personally offensive and intolerable to increasing numbers of people, a world in which, at last, there are moral constraints.

What is so frightening today is the fact that nuclear bombing (limited, they tell us) is becoming thinkable; and the more people are drawn into technical talk and the belief that some Other has the right to define the world, the more likely a nuclear war will be. I am cognizant of the connections between many schools and structures and the commitments of our technologized and increasingly militarized society. We need only point to the competencies orientation and the impacts of behaviorism to remind ourselves of the influence of the technological ethic, quantification, input-output thinking, and the rest. We know all too well how many practitioners treat their pupils or clients as objects or cases. The idea of letting people learn, the idea of freely chosen projects, the idea of interpretation: most of these, having little to do with efficiency, have been set aside. We all know of the learned ignorance imposed on so many young people, of the objectifications associated with too

many schools. Too many teachers have internalized the existing ideology; they ask themselves few questions; they seldom think what they are doing. I believe that, if anything is to be done in our schools where wide-awakeness and reflectiveness are concerned, there must be a consciousness of the pressures, of the impinging structures, of the mystifications. When people are brought to believe that things can be otherwise, when they are urged to imagine a better state of things, they are at least likely to become aware of what is insupportable in their lived experience and at the horizon of that field. If they are enabled to identify gaps and insufficiencies within the contexts of their own situations, they may reach out to try to remake some of the structures that confine, to make alliances with individuals in the community on behalf of specific lacks (pollution, perhaps, the dearth of playgrounds, the absence of health care, the need for storefront schools, the emergency where day care is concerned), even to engage in political and peace campaigns.

The point is, however, that all this must follow from self-understanding, from an awareness of the actually lived world, from a refusal of objectness, from a decision to be with others in a sphere that is intersubjectively meaningful. On this ground there can be new beginnings, efforts to surpass, to go beyond. Working for the day-care center, people may extend their reach to the Chilean mining town, the Cambodian beach, the Lebanese frontier. Struggling against technicism in their own curriculum, they may begin to understand what was said (and not said) at Three Mile Island, how so-called security decisions are often reached. Forging their own poetry, their own images, they may catch glimpses of horizons, understanding what is not yet.

And the goal? The "fundamental objectives" of peace education? To end the suffering, to cure the plague, to humanize the world. Of course the humanizing cannot be recognized until it is achieved; and once it is, there can only be new beginnings, new pursuits of possibility. Yes, I think that the facts of defense spending should be made clear, and the obsolescence of our economy, and the stubborn tendency to use old solutions for new problems, to reach back into a simpler past. Yes, I think the social consequences and the medical consequences and the moral consequences of nuclear stockpiling should be made clear, as should the impossibility of anyone's winning a nuclear war. People should be urged to reflect on our share of the responsibility for the arms race now going on, on the preoccupation with retaliatory weapons, on the statistical thinking that eludes all moral constraint. That is what represents the plague to me; and the kinds of calculations that account for it are precisely like those that maintain apartheid on this planet and teenage unemployment and starvation in the wealthiest cities, that demean women and blacks and even children, that ignore or regulate the jobless and the hungry and the poor. So I am suggesting that peace education be anticalculative education and that it lead to a critique of technical talk and control. I am suggesting too that young people be empowered to ponder new possibilities, alternatives to destruction and war.

They must be enabled to speak with their own voices, tell their own stories, and, yes, to love the world. I shall turn to Albert Camus for a conclusion, because his words are so very spare and pure:

The task is endless, it's true. But we are here to pursue it. . . . We have not overcome our condition, and yet we know it better. We know that we live in contradiction, but we also know that we must refuse this contradiction and do what is needed to reduce it. Our task . . . is to find the few principles that will calm the infinite anguish of free souls. We must mend what has been torn apart, make justice imaginable again in a world so obviously unjust, give happiness a meaning once more to peoples poisoned by the misery of this century. Naturally, it is a superhuman task. But superhuman is the term for tasks men take a long time to accomplish, that's all. Let us know our aims then, holding fast to the mind, even if force puts on a thoughtful or a comfortable face in order to seduce us. The first thing is not to despair.⁹

Notes

1 Japanese Broadcasting Company, ed., *Unforgettable Fire* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), p. 11.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

4 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 182-84.

5 Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), pp. 72-73.

6 "Notes and Comments," *The New Yorker*, April 27, 1981, pp. 35-36.

7 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 9.

8 Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), pp. 229-32.

9 Albert Camus, "The Almond Trees," in his *Lyrical and Critical Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), p. 135.