

For The Record: "The People Are Beautiful"

MAXINE GREENE

"Were you throwing bricks?" a white man asked nine-year-old Barry Barham who was standing in a candy store, eyeing some pretzels. "Not the first day," the Negro youngster said. "The second day I was out running around having fun."

This was part of a New York Times report on Springfield Avenue, Newark, a few days after the riots. At about the same time there was a confrontation between some youngsters who had dropped out of a Brooklyn high school and their former teachers. The drop-outs, asked to explain why they had left school, talked about the principal's lack of interest, the irrelevance of what they were taught, and the absence of love. One boy said, referring to the slum neighborhood surrounding the school: "This area may be physically repugnant to you, but a lot of the people are beautiful." A young man, also a drop-out, said (as quoted in *The New Republic*, August 5): "It's not the 'agitators' who blow up. It's us, all over the place, the colored people who say it's too late for us to wait when nothing comes anyway." On July 24, members of the Education Subcommittee of the Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee put some of the blame for the rioting on "educational starvation" in the slums. Senator Robert F. Kennedy said that the "ghetto schools" he had seen deserved "a flunking grade." Commissioner Harold Howe II, pointing to the high rate of unemployment among out-of-school youth in the slums, asked for support for vocational training and work-study programs. There was implied criticism of educators for their "rigidities" in the face of crisis, and for their reluctance to think of themselves as "social engineers."

What is the individual educator to think, to do? How is he to come to terms with a social crisis which has burst out into the open with the crack of guns, the splintering of glass, the hissing of flames? Individually, he cannot take responsibility for "educational starvation" throughout the nation's slums. Nor can he agree that he, individually, deserves "a flunking grade." Nor can he

admit to "rigidity" because he has committed himself to teaching and learning first and foremost rather than to effecting social reform.

As a member of white society, he unquestionably deserves to be shocked out of complacency. As a citizen, a voter, a member of a community, he like all other Americans can no longer afford to deny the starvation conditions in the south which forced so many thousands of Negroes to flee to the terrible slums up north. He like all other Americans can no longer afford to deny the depths of hopelessness, the ache of discontent experienced by the young people who are both black and poor. "They want," writes Bayard Rustin (*The New York Times Magazine*, August 13) "to be part of the white collar organization man's world that is America's future, not trapped behind brooms and pushcarts." Their wanting is stimulated mercilessly by advertised images of affluence, by the ubiquitous and indifferent white world. ("Who whetted this appetite?" asks Rustin. "Who profited from the sale of these commodities, and who advertised them? And who is victimized?")

We are all in some measure responsible. As citizens, voters, members of communities, we can do far, far more than we have done to bring about what John Dewey called "a planning society," the kind of society which provides decent housing, meaningful job opportunities, and a liberating education for all. But the individual educator, in his role as educator, has a particular, concrete job to do. He has to make learning possible for a great diversity of young persons, including those who live in the decaying and desperate slums. He has to make it possible for the little boy who had fun breaking windows and throwing bricks, for the one who is sure "it's too late," and for the one who wants it to be known that "black is beautiful." To do this, he has somehow to orient himself to the concrete, human side of the crisis in the cities. He has to look within himself, even as he looks about him—hopefully exchanging looks sometimes with those who have come

to learn. He has, at once, to maintain his loyalty to and excitement about the disciplines which are to be taught to those Robert Coles calls "the children of crisis"; and he must expect those children to feel some of his excitement, to learn—in their own time—to see what he sees. What is the use of his accepting "a flunking grade" at such a moment? He needs to be confident as well as honest with himself; he needs a kind of faith that he can succeed.

But his faith must not be blind. It must not stem from the bland self-assurance that is rooted in complacency. It must be a type of existential faith, achieved when an individual commits himself in an open world, and when he takes responsibility for his commitment. It cannot be the faith of simplistic optimism; nor can it be nurtured by certainty, by a belief in guarantees. The person capable of it is capable of confronting uncertainty, danger, even the likelihood of defeat. Perhaps it may be exemplified by Albert Camus's Sisyphus, the man who was condemned by the gods to the futile labor of rolling a rock to a mountaintop, only to see it rush down again. Camus is interested in Sisyphus when he is descending the mountain, at the time when he is conscious of himself, of his task, and of his freedom. His awareness of himself and of the world, his ability to say "yes" to the work he has to do give him dignity. Camus writes that he "teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks." He says: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart." There is no more need for the educator to assume an inevitable futility than there is for him to count on predestined success. He can find hope and happiness too if he commits himself to the upward climb. He can achieve fidelity if he keeps his eyes on the heights.

He will be distracted, though, and disheartened if he relies on conventional wisdom, on familiar stereotypes, or on schema which are inappropriate to the situations of his world. Robert Coles, in an article called "Violence in Ghetto Children" (Children, May-June 1967), makes a relevant point in the course of describing his experience with a bright but "difficult" boy who makes trouble and is doing poorly in school:

He is headed for trouble, but as I talk with him I find myself in trouble. I have asked him to draw pictures of himself, of his school, of his home, of anything he wishes. I get from him devastating portrayals: schools that look like jails; teachers whose faces show scorn or drowsiness; streets and homes that are as awful to see on paper as they are in real life; "outsiders" whose power and mercenary hostility are all too obvious; and, everywhere, the police, looking for trouble, creating trouble, checking up, hauling people to court, calling them names, getting ready to hurt them, assault them, jail them, and beat them up even if they are children. Once I asked the boy whether he really thought the police would hurt someone of his age. He said: "To the cops, everyone here is a little bad boy, no matter how old he is or how many grandchildren he has around."

The teacher or the administrator, reading that, may feel utterly helpless. But Dr. Coles goes on:

At moments like that my psychiatric, categorical mind finds itself stunned and for a change ready to grant that boy and others like him freedom from the various diagnostic, explanatory, or predictive schemes people like me learn so well and find to be (in our world) so useful.

He is describing the jolt, the moment of insight which, perhaps, permits a Sisyphus to begin still another climb to the mountaintop.

For the educator, this may suggest the importance of looking with fresh eyes upon the children of the poor who are in his classroom or his school. Granted, he cannot (anymore than can Dr. Coles) block out all the conceptual schemes he has mastered in his effort to become a professional. He cannot suddenly rely only upon intuition or "instinct" or the goodness of his heart. He can, however, reexamine the categories he uses in order to remind himself that they are used for the sake of organizing the phenomena of the world, that they are not to be confused with "reality." Most educators are familiar by now with the limitations of the "IQ" category. They understand that the IQ test is one of several modes of classifying

and ranking children, that a particular child's personality and promise are not encompassed or described when that is the category used. Similarly, the categories "disadvantage" or "deprivation" are ways of organizing phenomena for specific purposes, limited purposes. We cannot understand an individual pupil by saying he is disadvantaged anymore than we can understand him by simply saying he is in the third grade. Categories like these are used to help us differentiate the child who has grown up without middle class toys, comforts, conversation, and motivation from the child who begins his schooling with the head start made possible by affluence. They are used to help us give the disadvantaged child the special help he may need to catch up with the advantaged one—and that is all. If we use "diagnostic, explanatory, or predictive schemes" that do not take relevant differences into account, we are guilty of treating children unequally. If we misinterpret those schemes and forget that they are only devices of classification, we are guilty of denying the individuality and even the humanity of the young.

An appalling example of this can be found in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. The misuse of a term, a category, in Malcolm's case may well be the explanation for the hatreds that goaded him in later life. It happened when he was in the eighth grade, near the top of his class in scholastic achievement. He was alone in the classroom with his English teacher, who had given Malcolm high marks "and always made me feel that he liked me." He was the kind of teacher who enjoyed giving advice and encouraging any white student who wanted to strike out on his own and enter a profession.

He told me, "Malcolm, you ought to be thinking about a career. Have you been giving it thought?"

The truth is, I hadn't. I never have figured out why I told him, "Well, yes, sir, I've been thinking I'd like to be a lawyer." Lansing certainly had no Negro lawyers— or doctors either—in those days, to hold up an image I might have aspired to. All I really knew for certain was that a lawyer didn't wash dishes, as I was doing.

Mr. Ostrowski looked surprised, I remember, and leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He kind of half-smiled and said, "Malcolm, one of life's first needs is for us to be realistic. Don't misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer—that's no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be. You're good with your hands-making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don't you plan on carpentry? People like you as a person—you'd get all kinds of work."

Not surprisingly, Malcolm was later to write: "It was then that I began to change . . . inside."

The English teacher saw all Negro children, even the very bright and likeable ones, under the rubric "nigger," which kept him from seeing individuals. He had developed another scheme as well, a way of seeing he called "realistic." We might associate the old notion of "life-adjustment" with such an approach, the view that the aim of education is to equip a child to adapt to existing circumstances—to what is. If we were to take such an approach to slum youngsters today, we might find ourselves conditioning them to joblessness and apathy or (if we were cleverer) training them to do what Bayard Rustin says they prefer to dead-end jobs: "to live by their wits as hustlers or petty racketeers, their version of the self-employed businessman or salesman."

Most educators have grown beyond the "life-adjustment" era, for all the prevailing uncertainty about what expectations are reasonable for the children of the poor. There remain other schemes, other stereotypes that demand confrontation. Some of them have to do with "the Negro family"; some, with slavery and the resulting "problem of identity"; some, with images of violence and defiance of the law. A new one is now taking shape. It derives from the phrase "black power" and the racist hatred the phrase too often connotes.

Now it is certainly the case that the Negro family, as the Moynihan Report suggested,

has distinctive difficulties through no fault of its own. It is also the case that the identity problem is exacerbated when a person is black and poor. And it is undeniable that, in the recent riots, there were violence and lawlessness in the slums. But is it appropriate for a teacher to look at one of his pupils with "the Negro family" in mind? Is it appropriate to look at him and see a psychological "case," a delinquent—or a child given to throwing bricks? If a teacher sees this way whenever a Negro child appears, what happens to his expectations, to his sense of himself as a practitioner? Jean-Paul Sartre (in *Anti-Semite and Jew*) has something to say to such a teacher: ". . . it is not the Jewish character that provokes anti-Semitism, but rather . . . it is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew." Is it not true that simple prejudice creates the "Negro" many people (including certain educators) see? And does not that image become reinforced when we insist on looking at individual children through abstractions or stereotypes like those noted above?

Lately, the cry of "black power" has reinforced the image even more. It has permitted white people, in fact, to become self-righteous in their fear and distrust. Yet that very phrase, for all the defiance and frustration it has expressed, represents a protest against the "Negro" whom prejudice has created. Nathan Wright, Jr. (in *Black Power and Urban Unrest*) treats the concept of "black power" as a response to the feeling of powerlessness. "The thrust of Black Power," he writes, "is toward freeing the latent power of Negroes to enrich the life of the whole nation. The demand for Black Power is a demand to participate as full-grown men in making all of America become what it should be."

We can acknowledge the threatening and frenzied uses of the term; we can resist the obscene hatreds it occasionally arouses but we can, at the same time, try to discover what it means when used in a positive sense. And, indeed, the National Committee of Negro Churchmen, meeting in the summer of 1966, worked hard to define positive implications. They did much, Wright reports, to define the "re-creative role" the idea might play.

Perhaps oddly, the role Dr. Wright outlines in his book is one of enormous relevance for educators concerned with Negro children. This is because educators are—and must be—concerned with potentiality and with the development of human resources. Talking of the schools, Nathan Wright says that, in spite of the presence of a certain amount of prejudice, "much of what looked like negative racism on the part of teachers in the urban schools was just the opposite. It was a kind of seemingly thoughtful care, concern and solicitation which prompted teachers of Negro pupils to encourage their pupils' studies only in areas where Negroes clearly would have opportunities to work or to succeed." He blames "kindheartedness," among other things, for limiting Negro opportunities. He proposes that the schools be run by "blue ribbon," inter-disciplinary committees, involving "the whole range of professional and civic interest groups." He hopes to see an "inter-group dialogue" as planning takes place, and he wants to see staff involvement in planning within the inner city schools.

Then, significantly, he objects to training and vocational programs for the Negro poor. Like many contemporary educational thinkers, he believes that "a broadly humane education" is demanded by the changes taking place in our world. "Our whole society," he writes, "must be infused with learning which will equip our citizens for the continual maintenance and development of a society of, by, and for free men. Only thus, in the final analysis, may we hope for our urban unrest to be fully overcome." He would agree with such educational theorists and philosophers as Broudy, Smith, and Burnett (in *Democracy and Excellence in American Secondary Education*), Philip G. Smith (in *Philosophy of Education*), Solon T. Kimball and James E. McClellan, Jr. (in *Education and the New America*), and Philip H. Phenix (in *Realms of Meaning*) that what we need is "a comprehensive and systematic view of the curriculum for common, general education" or general education conceived as "a process of engendering essential meanings." Nothing less is required, Wright would say, if education is to "empower for life as well as for livelihood."

This positive conception of "black power" becomes important, then, in several ways. For one thing, a confrontation with it may test the educator's ability to counter stereotypes and to realize again that the meanings of terms are functions of their contexts. ("Black power," after all, is only a phrase. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael use it in one way, to achieve their own purposes. The Negro Churchmen use it in another way, to achieve purposes apparently congruent with those of teachers concerned about teaching the poor.) For another thing, the notion may fire the imagination of the individual educator, if he permits it to do so, enabling him to see in terms of possibility rather than predetermined limitation.

When all is said and done, the crucial encounters are between the individual educator and the individual child. In nearly a century and a half of "common" schooling, teachers and administrators have seldom faced a challenge like the one now confronting them in the inner city slums. One reason is that previous generations could be more sanguine about the opportunities awaiting youngsters, even those with eight years of school. Another is that previous generations were far more likely to accede to inequality and to the claim that only some young people were equipped to profit from schooling which was liberal and humane. Still another is that previous generations could more easily deny what was happening in remote parts of their cities and the world.

Today, because of the inescapable mass media, the trauma of the slums is inescapable. Somehow or other every citizen has to make sense of what is happening and take a position with respect to it. The inner city educator, perhaps most of all, is obligated not only to understand but to remake and clarify his own commitment. The test of the choice he makes is the degree to which he enables young people to learn—the child who threw bricks, the one who became tired of waiting, and the boy who wanted it known that there were beautiful people in the slums. Beauty and power: these may in time become watchwords for educators. We need finally to perceive the beauty and release the power for constructive ends. This is the work

of education; this is the upward climb. It may, if we are fortunate, generate a "higher fidelity" the faith that "raises rocks."

MG

SAMPLINGS

Two little books of poetry have come to our attention at the same time. They are utterly different; but each, in its own way, suggests what it means to give objective form to experience—to transmute what is encountered into art.

The first, *Juju Of My Own*, by Lebert Bethune (An Afro-American Production, 1966), is "real" poetry, arising out of the subjectivity of a young man "living in the Western world, cut off by slavery and colonialism from the cultural well-spring of his motherland—Africa." The second, *Pop Poems*, by Ronald Gross (Simon and Shuster, 1967), is a collection of "found" poetry, in the sense that it begins with labels, slogans, headlines and other such materials found in the popular culture, abstracts them from their contexts, and gives them something like poetic form.

Bethune, who is a novelist, playwright, and film-maker as well as a poet, explains that "Juju" is an African word meaning talisman or genie. Recalling a lullaby sung by his grandmother, he writes in the title poem:

So I am fashioning this thing
My own Juju
Out of her life and our desire
Out of an old black love
I am baking my destiny to a lullaby—

The grandmother was baking clay, significantly enough, in Jamaica where the young poet spent his childhood— and singing an African song. His talismans radiate outward from that memory. They include a remarkable rendering of a statue of a marble Apollo at the Apollo movie theatre in Harlem ("That kinda god/ Would have to lose his timelessness. . ."); some portraits out of Africa; "Paeon for a Black Hero" for Malcolm X; a vision of a brass band on a Paris street evoking a carnival from childhood, with "dancers in high

colours/Prancing all over the street. . . . "

This is poetry of a marvelous immediacy written by a young man who has lived and worked in New York, in various parts of Europe, and in Africa as well. The last poem in the book may communicate something of what he can do with language, imagery, and the strange conjunctions of experience. It is called "Blues in the Platz (Leipzig)":

In the center of the Platz
Shuffling through deep snow
Met a man from Kilimanjaro
Up to his neck in fur—
Said . . .
"I'm from Kilimanjaro country"
And—
"We know snow there, but. . . ."

Just dig,
Him small black and stiff
Me lonely too and numb
Near the center of the Platz
A'shushing through new snow
The man from Kilimanjaro country and me.

The jazz sound, the staccato images of popular culture are in Bethune's poetry throughout, along with the pervasive harmonies of something that endures, something the poet calls "certainties." Ronald Gross does not attempt to penetrate the surfaces. His concern is with the surfaces, the appearances of our linguistic universe—just as the Pop painter's concern is with presenting the banal, the ubiquitous (and the invisible) as art.

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Consider his Haiku:

Please—if you don't see
what you want in the window—
come inside and ask!

Or "Now It's Pepsi":
Now it's Pepsi
for those who
think young.

Now
parties are more
informal, more fun.

He makes a poem (somewhat like one of Apollinaire's pictorial poems) out of a section of an index, beginning with "Odyssey" and ending with "Oververbalization." He does a version of Stephen Vincent Benet's "American Names" in "America is Names," which ends "So it's up to you/ as a salesman/ for a brand name/ to keep pushing/ not only YOUR BRAND/ but brands/ in general."

Ronald Gross, well known as a writer and consultant on educational problems, gives some indication of being a legitimate poet, once he lets himself play with words. Certainly he has succeeded in presenting segments of our language as artifacts, worth attending to for the odd "sense" they reveal. He may even have succeeded in opening up new possibilities for English teachers. Why not, after all, begin with the stuff of the visible and legible world and go on to play with language, to experiment with giving it form?

Not everyone has the gift to make a "Juju" of his own; but everyone has the capacity to manipulate words and explore new meanings. The person freed to do this may be the person freed to find himself.

MG