Teaching: The Question of Personal Reality

MAXINE GREENE
Teachers College, Columbia University

The realities of teaching are multiple. Three points of view, three tones of voice begin to suggest the range. The first is John Dewey's:

> The principle that development of experience comes about through interaction means that education is essentially a social process. This quality is realized in the degree in which individuals form a community group. It is absurd to exclude the teacher from membership in the group. As the most mature member of the group he has a peculiar responsibility for the conduct of the interactions and intercommunications which are the very life of the group as a community.[1]

The second is B. Othanel Smith's:

> Our most general notion is that teaching is everywhere the same, that it is a natural social phenomenon and is fundamentally the same from one culture to another. . . . In our view, teaching is a system of action involving an agent, a situation, an end-in-view, and two sets of factors in the situation—one set over which the agent has no control (for example, size of classroom and physical characteristics of pupils) and one set which the agent can modify with respect to the end-in-view (for example, assignments and ways of asking questions).[2]

The third is Martin Buber's. He, too, was writing about the teaching situation—always, he thought, a situation "that has never been before and will never come again."

1 John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 58.

2 B. Othanel Smith, "Toward a Theory of Teaching," in *Theory and Research in Teaching*, ed. Arno A. Bellack (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, 196S), p. 4.

> It demands of you a reaction which cannot be prepared beforehand. It demands nothing of what is past. It demands presence, responsibility; it demands you.[3]

To talk about the personal reality of teachers is to consider their lived lives and their pursuits of meaning in contexts that include a concern for the social dimensions of teaching, for the strategic, *and* for the existentially unique. It is, if possible, to avoid the kinds of either/ors or dichotomies that arise when the social is viewed as antithetical to the individual, or when the cognitive and conceptual are treated as if they were at odds with the affective, the authentic, the humane.

What we understand to be "reality" is interpreted or reflected-on experience. We live in continuing transactions with the natural and human world around us. Perceived shapes, colors, lights, sounds, present themselves to our embodied consciousness. Only as we begin moving into the life of language, thematizing, symbolizing, making sense, do we begin to single out certain profiles, certain aspects of the flux of things to attend to and to name.[4] Once we begin doing that, we begin orienting ourselves to what we think of as the "real." The patterns or schemata we use in the process of sense-making are those made available to us by "our predecessors and contemporaries."[5] We are, after all, functions of a culture; most of those teaching in the public schools speak the same language. The realities we construct—schools, for example, time clocks, running tracks, political parties, dining room tables, public squares—mean what they mean because we have internalized common ways of thinking about them and talking about them. But, at the same time, each of us looks upon the common world from a particular standpoint, a particular location in space and time. Each of us has a distinctive biography, a singular life history. Each of us, to use George Herbert Mead's words, is both an "I" and a "me." The "I" gives us our "sense of freedom, of initiative." It is, Mead said, "the response of the organism to the attitudes of others; the 'me' is the organized set of attitudes of others which one . . . assumes. The attitudes of the others constitute the organized 'me', and then one reacts toward that as an 'I.' "[6] The "me," therefore, is social; it refers to the shared social reality we respond to as we live. There is always,

3 Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 114.

4 See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 12-42.

5 Alfred Schutz, "Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation," in Collected Papers I, *The Problem of Social Reality* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), pp. 15f.

6 George H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), p. 175.

however, the perspective and the agency of the "I"; and this means that there is always the possibility of self-consciousness, of choosing, and of unpredictability. It is with these that I wish to associate the idea of personal reality.

When we look back, most of us realize that we somehow knew about teachers and classrooms very early in our lives, long before we went to school. The specific teachers and classrooms with which we later came in contact, therefore, appeared within a horizon of "pre-acquaintanceship."[7] We were already familiar with the difference between larger and smaller people, with the spaces and surfaces prohibited to us—and the spaces and surfaces we were expected to explore. We were accustomed to hands that helped and hands that restrained, voices that disapproved and voices that tried to point things out, to help us understand, to help us see. If there were bookshelves in our homes, and sheets of paper, and memo pads, these simply belonged to the world of daily life. They were part of the background or the scenery, taken for granted as what they appeared to be. It was only when we actually became pupils in actual classrooms that we began to identify unique instances of teaching behavior, to select out something called "teaching" against what we had taken for granted. It was then that we began perceiving books and paper in terms of a specified kind of use. It was then that we began noticing chalkboards, charts, attendance sheets, grade books, as indicators, somehow, of a new kind of social world. We did not, of course, see all this in identical ways. We constituted them, as we constituted our classrooms, in the light of the particular problems we faced in becoming pupils (or "third graders," or "bluebirds") among other children in a regularized, oddly public place away from home. The nature of our "interest" and what Alfred Schutz described as "the system of relevances involved"[8] originated in our own biographical situations and in the circumstances that prevailed in our lives at the time we first went to school.

As we grew older along with others and experienced diverse teachers and teaching situations, we built up a structure of meanings. Many of these meanings derived from the ways in which our choices and purposes were supported or frustrated by other people's choices and purposes in the shifting social worlds of the classrooms we came to know. Some derived from our developing commonsense understanding of the workings of those worlds. Then, at least for some of us, there were the meanings that emerged from our reflections on our commonsense understandings, reflec-

7 Schutz, "Concept and Theory Formation," in *the Problem of Social Reality,* p. 59.
8 Ibid., p. 60.

tions made possible by an ability to "do" psychology or one of the social sciences, by a developed skill in tracing certain political currents in the schools, or by an achieved capacity to think in terms of teaching strategies.

There came a time, finally, when we began thinking about teaching as a way of spending our working lives. Like all other human beings, we could not but "future," in some sense, think about what might be. As Jean-Paul Sartre has written, our behavior is not only determined by our relation "to the real and present factors which condition it," but by "a certain object, still to come, which it is trying to bring into being." And Sartre went on to say, "This is what we call *the project*."[9] We may be moved to choose our project because of certain lacks in a social situation in which we are involved: We may want to repair those lacks and make that situation what it might be, rather than what it is. Or our choice of project may be connected with our notion of what we want to make of ourselves, of the kinds of identity we want to create. In either case, we are trying to become what we are not yet by acting on perceived deficiency, or on perceived possibility.

Dewey wrote that "the self is not ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action . . . ."[10] He said that if an individual, say, was interested in keeping at his or her work even if his or her life were endangered, that would be because the individual found his or her self *"in* that work." People who give up in the face of danger or threat or discomfort are people who, in choosing their own security or comfort, are declaring their preference to be people of that sort; they are creating prudent, comfortable selves. Dewey stressed the fact that "self and interest are two names for the same fact; the kind and amount of interest actively taken in a thing reveals and measures the quality of selfhood which exists."[11] To think of the self in this fashion or to define personal reality in this fashion is very different from placing one's credence in "self-actualization" or in any approach focused on an unfolding or realization of an original, authentic self. Dewey believed, as does Sartre, that what we become, what we make of ourselves, depends upon what we do in our lives. And what we do cannot be simply routine and mechanical; it must be conscious, interested, committed. If it is not, if we content ourselves with being behaving organisms rather than reflective persons engaged in ongoing *action,* the quality of our selfhood becomes thin and

9 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 91.
10 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), p. 408.
11 Ibid.

pallid. We begin to resemble those T. S. Eliot called "hollow men,"[12] or those Thoreau described as living their lives in "quiet desperation."[13]

We who choose ourselves to become teachers obviously have an "interest" when we do so. As has been suggested, that interest arises out of our biographical situation, as much as it does out of a sense of what we are trying to bring into being. There are those who select out the nurturant dimension of teaching and focus on creating themselves as caring persons, motherly or fatherly persons, interested very often in open-ended growth. There are those who attend most particularly to the social dimension of the educational process: the transmission or communication of a way of life; the fostering of the democratic ideal; the shaping of community. There are those who find themselves so challenged, so enlightened by engagement with an academic discipline that they turn toward teaching as a way of introducing others to the domain of history or physics or sociology or literary studies, in the hope that their perspectives also will be expanded, even as they become initiates in the community of scholars—or (perhaps) sophisticated technicians, bibliophiles, mediators for another generation of the young. And there are always persons who turn toward teaching because they see themselves as people committed to arousing others to critical thinking or to "conscientization"[14] or even to bringing about social change. And there are a few who want especially to stimulate awareness and understanding of the arts, and a few who want to train apprentices for one of the fields of scientific inquiry. I am speaking of the interests that appear to motivate persons when they decide to enter into teaching, interests that may be refined or eroded or totally transformed in the course of teacher training, but that remain present in the individual's historical situation, no matter what happens in his or her everyday.

What happens, of course, when we have our initial experiences with teaching in public schools, is that we become sharply aware of limits, of structures and arrangements that cannot easily be surpassed. No matter how practical, how grounded our educational courses were, they suddenly appear to be totally irrelevant in the concrete situation where we find ourselves. This is because general principles never fully apply to new and special situations, especially if those principles are thought of as prescrip-

12 T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952), pp. 56-59.

13 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), p. 69.

14 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 157.

tions or rules. Dewey spoke of principles as modes or methods of analyzing situations, tools to be used "in judging suggested courses of action."[15] They provide standpoints, ways of interpreting or making sense of what is happening; they are not practical, as rules are practical; they do not tell us specifically what to do. Yet, when we first enter into the classrooms for which we are responsible, or when we confront groups of students who are resistant or undisciplined or inept, we long for rules or for someone to tell us "what to do at 9 o'clock." We forget that, for a rule to be universally applicable, all situations must be fundamentally alike; and, as most of us know, classroom situations are always new and never twice alike. Even so, we yearn oftentimes for what might be called a "technology of teaching," for standard operating procedures that can be relied upon to "work." Devoid of these, we project our frustration back upon whatever teacher education we experienced; or (in cases of extremity) we project our frustration outward to the young people in our classes, the creatures who seem to be rejecting what we offer them—an alienated and alienating crowd who do not seem to care about learning how to learn.

Obviously, this does not always happen. But there are few teachers who avoid the anxiety of beginning, few who can see beyond the limits or succeed in breaking through. It is difficult to gain the capacity "of going beyond created structures" (to use the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty) "in order to create others."[16] And yet, as Merleau-Ponty saw it, this capacity—like the power to choose and vary points of view—is what defines the human being. There are obstacles that inhere in the organization of the public schools, particularly if they are bureaucratically run and visibly hierarchical. There are obstacles raised by the pressures of parents and school boards, perhaps especially in suburban or middle-class communities. There are obstacles to be found in the emphasis on "competencies," in "accountability" arrangements, in the technological language so often spoken, in the ubiquity of testing and measurement.

The problem is that, confronted with structural and political pressures, many teachers (even effectual ones) cope by becoming merely efficient, by functioning compliantly—like Kafkaesque clerks. There are many who protect themselves by remaining basically uninvolved; there are many who are so bored, so lacking in expectancy, they no longer care. I doubt that many teachers deliberately choose to act as accomplices in a

15 John Dewey, *Theory of the Moral Life* (New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960), p. 137.

16 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 175.

system they themselves understand to be inequitable; but feelings of powerlessness, coupled with indifference, may permit the so-called "hidden curriculum" to be communicated uncritically to students. Alienated teachers, out of touch with their own existential reality, may contribute to the distancing and even to the manipulating that presumably take place in many schools. This is because, estranged from themselves as they are, they may well treat whatever they imagine to be selfhood as a kind of commodity, a possession they carry within, impervious to organizational demand and impervious to control. Such people are not personally *present* to others or in the situations of their lives. They can, even without intending it, treat others as objects or things. This is because human beings who lack an awareness of their own personal reality (which is futuring, questing) cannot exist in a "we-relation" with other human beings. They cannot know what it means to live through a "vivid present in common" with another, to share another's "flux of experience in inner time."[17] Unable to come in touch with their own inner time, they cannot experience what Schutz called "the mutual tuning-in relationship, the experience of the 'We', which is at the foundation of all possible communication."[18] It appears to me that without the ability to enter a "mutual tuning-in relationship," the teacher is in some manner incapacitated; since teaching is, in so many of its dimensions, a mode of encounter, of communication. This is one of the several reasons why I am arguing the importance of a recovery of personal reality.

Dewey, it will be recalled, said that the self is "something that is in continuous formation through choice of action." This suggests that teachers lacking a sense of self are the kinds of people who sit back and affirm that they are defined, indeed identified by their roles. Dewey stressed *"continuous* formation" and meant that persons are forever in process, forever growing and reconstructing their experiences. They are forever in pursuit of themselves. To deny that is to deny possibility, to deny the power to risk and to choose. As Sartre has said, we cannot be obliged to be *what* we are; we must continue making ourselves what we might be. A teacher who has become his/her role resembles the café waiter Sartre has described, the man whose "movement is quick and studied, a little too precise, a little too rapid." He moves like a mechanism, as if "imitating the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things." It is as if he is performing a part, as if he is nothing *but* a café waiter (as an inkwell is

17 Alfred Schutz, "Making Music Together," in Collected Papers II, *Studies in Social Theory* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), p. 173.

18 Ibid.

an inkwell, as a glass is a glass). He cannot transcend his role; he cannot imagine himself as anything *but* a café waiter; and so he is in bad faith. Sartre has given another example as well: "The attentive pupil who wishes to *be* attentive, his eyes riveted on the teacher, his ears open wide, so exhausts himself in playing the attentive role that he ends up by no longer hearing anything."[19] In all these cases, the individual person (teacher, caf6 waiter, or attentive child) is refusing to confront the fact that it was his/her free choice to get up in the morning and go to the school or the cafe, and that it is he or she who confers meaning and value on the work being done, the role being played. The crucial point is that the individual, conscious of multiple possibilities, must be aware that he/she is choosing to wait on tables, to study, to teach, choosing each day that he/she lives.

The "choice of action" must be interested as well as reflective; if not, the teacher is likely to be bored, as well as without care. I think of characters in literature who are bored in this sense, who drift without commitment through their lives. There is Frederic Moreau, in Gustave Flaubert's *A Sentimental Education*, the young man who can never choose a coherent line of action, who can never feel involved. At the end of the novel, he is sitting with his friend, who has also failed to realize any of his hopes. Typically, they are looking backward rather than forward. "They had both failed, one to realize his dreams of love, the other to fulfil his dreams of power. What was the reason?"[20] They had dreamed; they had wandered; they had taken no responsibility. "Then they blamed chance, circumstances, the times into which they were born."[21] And that is another mode of bad faith, not unknown among teachers: the habit of blaming ineffectuality on the institution, on circumstances, and the times.

Another example, perhaps more fearful, is to be found in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*. A vibrant, rebellious girl and woman, Sula is capable of watching from a distance when a child drowns, and when her mother burns to death. Also, she drifts around the cities of the country in pointless boredom, finding that all the cities "held the same people, working the same mouths, sweating the same sweat."[22] And then:

> In a way, her strangeness, her naivete, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she

19 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 60.
20 Gustave Flaubert, *A Sentimental Education* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 417.
21 Ibid., p. 418.
22 Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), p. 104.

> paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.[23]

This may be another way of talking about the necessity of a life project, of some purposeful work to do. It is also another way of suggesting the need for a medium or a meaningful activity if a self is to come into being, if a personal reality is to be achieved. A contrary example, one that dramatizes such an achievement, is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man.* At the end, when the narrator (having lived underground) is about to emerge and move back into the social world, he says:

> In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the *mind.* And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as individuals. Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out, I must emerge.[24]

He had given "pattern to the chaos" by taking the action of telling about it, writing about it, because he was unable to "file and forget." And, in the course of acting according to a "plan of living," he had attained a version of visibility; he had begun to create a self.

I would lay particular emphasis on choice. I believe that teachers willing to take the risk of coming in touch with themselves, of creating themselves, have to exist in a kind of tension; because it is always easier to fall back into indifference, into mere conformity, if not into bad faith. In Albert Camus's *The Plague*, Tarrou sees the sickness that has befallen the town of Oran to signify, among other things, abstractness and indifference. He tells Dr. Rieux that everyone has the plague within him, that "what's natural is the microbe." He goes on to explain:

> All the rest—health, integrity, purity (if you like)—is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter. The good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention. And it needs tremendous will-power, a never ending tension of the mind, to avoid such lapses. Yes, Rieux, it's a wearying business, being plague-stricken. But it's still more wearying to refuse

23 Ibid., p. 105.

24 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1952), p. 502.

to be it. That's why everybody in the world today looks so tired; everyone is more or less sick of plague.[25]

Self-awareness, self-discovery, self-actualization: These are often made to seem affairs of feeling, mainly, or of intuition. Teachers are asked to heighten their sensitivity, to tap the affective dimension of their lives, to trust, to love. Of course it is important to reach out, to feel, to experience love and concern. But I believe that, if teachers are truly to be present to themselves and to others, they need to exert effort in overcoming the weariness Camus described—a weariness all teachers, at some level, recognize. I believe that, for teachers as well as plague-fighters, "health, integrity, purity," and the rest must be consciously chosen. So must interest and good faith.

I have talked about the original interests that move persons to decide to take up teaching as a career. I have touched on the ways in which the demands of institutional situations make certain teachers set those interests aside. A lover of poetry, for instance, once eager to open the world of poetry to the young, may find it impossible to reconcile that desire (and that love) with the requirements of socialization and control. A person with an interest in physics or chemistry, hoping to inspire young apprentices, may find it too difficult to engage students with actual inquiries and at once maintain order in the classroom. The consequence may be a repression of the original enthusiasm and a resigned decision to have things the way they are "spozed to be."[26] Understandable though this is, the decision is evocative of the one Dewey had in mind when he spoke of people who give up in the face of discomfort or danger: Such teachers are declaring their preference to be teachers who choose to keep order and simply disseminate as many bits of knowledge as they can. This is quite different from the choice to create a situation in which knowledge can be sought and meanings pursued. It is quite different from the choice to institute the kind of dialogue that might move the young to pose their own worthwhile questions, to tell their own stories, to reach out in their being together to learn how to learn. And it may well be that the teachers who make such decisions are alienating themselves still more from what they think of as their personal reality.

For one thing, it is important to move back in inner time and attempt to recapture the ways in which the meanings of teaching

25 Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 229.

26 James Herndon, *The Way It Spozed to Be* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969).

(and schooling) were sedimented over the years. It should not be impossible for individual teachers to reflect back upon the ways in which they have constituted what they take to be the realities of their lived worlds. To look back, to remember is to bind the incidents of past experience, to create patterns in the stream of consciousness. We identify ourselves by means of memory; and, at once, we compose the stories of our lives. In Sartre's *Nausea,* Roquentin points out that "everything changes when you tell about life . . . ."[27] There are beginnings and endings; there are significant moments; banal events are transformed. Hannah Arendt has written of the importance of "enacted stories" and the ways in which stories disclose a "who," an "agent; she has made the point that every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end . . . ."[28]

Looking back, recapturing their stories, teachers can recover their own standpoints on the social world. Reminded of the importance of biographical situation and the ways in which it conditions perspective, they may be able to understand the provisional character of their knowing, of all knowing. They may come to see that, like other living beings, they could only discern profiles, aspects of the world. Making an effort to interpret the texts of their life stories, listening to others' stories in whatever "web of relationships"[29] they find themselves, they may be able to multiply the perspectives through which they look upon the realities of teaching; they may be able to choose themselves anew in the light of an expanded interest, an enriched sense of reality. Those who wished to become nurturant beings may (having entered new "provinces of meaning,"[30] looked from different vantage points) come to see that nurturing too can only be undertaken within social situations, and that the social situation in the school must be seen in relation to other situations lived by the young. Those who chose themselves as keepers of the academic disciplines may come to realize that the perspectives made possible by the disciplines are meaningful when they illuminate the experience of the learner, when they enable him or her to order the materials of his/her own lived world. Those who focused primarily on the social process may come to see that existing individuals, each in his/her own "here" and own "now," act in their intersubjectivity to bring the social reality into being, and that attention must be paid to the person in

27 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (New York: New Directions Press, 1959), p. 16.
28 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 184.
29 Ibid.
30 See Alfred Schutz, "On Multiple Realities," in *The Problem of Social Reality,* pp. 231f.

his/her uniqueness even as it is paid to the community. Seeing more, each one may be more likely to become "a network of relationships"[31] and perhaps be more likely to act in his or her achieved freedom to cut loose from anchorage and choose anew.

The diversification of perspectives has much to do, I think, with the sense of personal reality; but I would add that it is equally important for those engaged in seeking themselves to involve themselves in critique. By that I mean critical reflection upon the social situation, especially the situation they live in common. The dangers of submergence are multiple, as we have seen. Teachers suffer in many ways what they experience as conditioning or manipulation by their superiors or by the "system" itself. To reflect upon the situation, even the bureaucratic situation, is to try to understand some of the forces that frustrate their quests for themselves and their efforts to create themselves as the teachers they want to be. At once, it is to identify the kinds of lacks in that situation that require naming and repair: impersonality, for example; reliance on external criteria of "performance"; inequitable tracking; mindless routines. Coming together to determine what is possible, teachers may discover a determination to transcend.

I am suggesting that a concern for personal reality cannot be divorced from a concern for cooperative action within some sort of community. It is when teachers are together as persons, according to norms and principles they have freely chosen, that interest becomes intensified and commitments are made. And this may open pathways to expanded landscapes, richer ways of being human—unique and in the "we-relation" at one and the same time.

Hannah Arendt has told a story about some former members of the French Resistance who felt that they had "lost their treasure" when the war was over and they returned to ordinary life; and what she wrote seems to apply to teachers and their search for their personal reality.

> What was this treasure? As they themselves understood it, it seems to have consisted . . . of two interconnected parts: they had discovered that he who "joined the Resistance, found himself," . . . that he no longer suspected himself of "insincerity," of being "a carping, suspicious actor of life," that he could afford to "go naked." In this nakedness, stripped of all masks—of those which society assigns to its members as well as those which the individual fabricates for himself in his psycho-

[31] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1967), p. 456.

> logical reactions against **society—they** had been visited . . . by an apparition of **freedom**, not, to be sure, because they acted against tyranny . . . but because they had become **"challengers,"** and had taken the initiative upon themselves and therefore . . . had begun to create that public space between themselves where freedom could **appear.**[32]

I want to see teachers become challengers and take the initiative upon themselves. As they do so, as *we* do so, there will emerge a "public space" where personal reality can be at last affirmed.

32 Hannah **Arendt,** *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, **1961),** p. 4.