

*But there come times--perhaps this is one of them--  
when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die;  
when we have to pull back from the incantations,  
rhythms we moved to thoughtlessly,  
and disentrall ourselves, bestow  
ourselves to silence or a severer listening, cleansed  
of formulas, oratory, choruses, laments, static  
crowding the wires.*

This is the poet Adrienne Rich urging us on to clarity, to thoughtfulness, to a new kind of awareness. I read it with a peculiar sense of relevance in what to me is a time of crisis, Two days ago we read of President Bush's veto of a bill intended to place limits on the kinds of interrogation the CIA use with suspected terrorists. Many of us could not but associate this to the talk of waterboarding, the practice of rendition, the pictures of our soldiers torturing and degrading Iraqi prisoners, what we know and do not know about Guantanamo, and prison cells where prisoners are refused contact with the outside world. All this adds up for me to crisis--a moral crisis, a political crisis and (I would hope, at least for some of us, ) a personal crisis, But how are we to respond? What sort of pedagogy is called for in what some call "exceptional times"? How can we create environments in our classrooms that are provocative and sustaining? How can we open the way for dialogue, for the posing of difficult questions, for acknowledgment of the unanswerable.?"

Pondering all this and wondering what it means "to take ourselves more seriously," I turn--after some years--to Albert Camus's novel, THE PLAGUE, which has taken on a new importance for me. It is not because the disease becomes a metaphor for what is happening around us and, in my judgment, having an effect on teachers in the schools. It is rather the denials and the self-involvement that, for me, are represented by the metaphor and call on us in education to take ourselves and our condition more seriously.

It is not incidental that the town of Oran that is afflicted so suddenly by the plague is a town where most people are bored and devote themselves to cultivating habits. Their chief interest is commerce; and their chief aim in life is, as they call it, "doing business". Not surprisingly, it is a town without intimations. No one believes that such an orderly and respectable place can be struck by catastrophe. When the rats begin to infest the town and their fleas escape and begin to infect people, the Prefect refuses to take any precautions for fear of upsetting the citizens. When it can no longer be kept secret and the numbers of the dead begin to multiply, there are still those who are sure they are invulnerable, who pay little attention when corpses are tossed in trucks or when people scream in protest when sick relatives are carried away to protect those who are not yet designated as diseased.

Dr. Rieux, who is among the first to confront the disease, says he chose his career for entirely abstract reasons and that he is fighting the plague, which he knows is incurable, because it is "only logical" and because it is his job. If, he believes, one can be lucid, and recognize clearly what is happening and what has to be done, the plague will end in time. Anything else, he says, is unthinkable. That too is a mode of denial, and it takes prolonged experience with suffering for Dr. Rieux to realize how abstractness can cripple pity and feeling itself. His "job" changes, as the plague gets worse, from relieving pain to imparting "information" about quarantine and the plague hospitals and the town gates being locked--condemning the townspeople to separation from loved ones outside and to feelings of endless exile. Deprived of hope, they had no sense of a future; and, since the capacity for friendship and for love asked something of the future. They could live in a nondescript way only for the present, like prisoners staring into a void.

Tarrou, a newcomer, arrives and says he has come to help the overworked doctors. He loathes men's being condemned to death and can never accept an argument justifying such killing by hanging, electrocution, or bombing--or by getting someone else to do it. He has learned, he says, that "even those who are better than the rest could not keep themselves from killing or letting others kill, because such is the logic by which people live, and we can't stir a finger in this world without bringing death to somebody." When asked what path he would follow to reach what he most wants, he says, "the path of sympathy". And Rieux, asked why he fights with such devotion a battle he cannot win, he says he does not want to be a saint or a hero but a truly human being. Later on, when Rieux and Tarrou take an hour from the plague "for friendship," Tarrou tells his life story and why he is a carrier of plague. He says that no one on earth is free from it. "And I know too that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless moment we breathe in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him. What's natural is the microbe. All the rest--health, integrity, purity (if you like)--is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter. The one who has the fewest lapses of attention is the one who infects hardly anyone."

Tarrou's interest and attentiveness lead him to reach out to the citizens to draw them from their solitude and offer opportunities for action. He organizes sanitary squads and succeeds in attracting volunteers the officials of the town could never attract. It appears that people are far more likely to act in their freedom for a common cause than to be expected or compelled or even rewarded for their service. So they clean out neglected corners, drive ambulances, do repairs, sit with the sick and, in the process, change what had been almost a private affair into a moral concern for everyone. Looking back to Tarrou's words about the microbe and the human will, we are likely to think them cold and prescriptive, applicable mainly to a plague-stricken town. When, however, we think of the plague as carelessness or indifference, we may well recall the major part it has played in our history, at least as represented in our literature.

We might recall the disinterest in the lives of workers and the poor on the part of the early factory-owners, bankers, and speculators. Images of rag pickers, prisoners, women on the streets cannot but rear up in our minds when we look back, few of them attracting human concern. There are the idle, the wealthy, the self-absorbed, bored like the citizens of Oran; and boredom is how indifference often reveals itself to consciousness. A prime instance may be the interplay of a fated dream, delusion, and the "meretriciousness" in the eastern air in *THE GREAT GATSBY*. The smoke from the "valley of ashes" with its laboring men stains the sky, while the rich play meaningless games. The wealthy Buchanans flee their Long Island to escape blame for the two deaths for which they were responsible.; it is their "vast carelessness" that permits them to run, that and their reliance on wealth and pride in thinking themselves upper class..

It should be clear that much of the suffering of Afro-Americans in this country has been due to what the narrator of Ralph Ellison's *INVISIBLE MAN* calls the lack of recognition, meaning the absence of acknowledgement as a person, an individual. It has categorized him under a label of "nobodyness", guaranteeing that the way he will be seen will depend on the condition of the eyes of those looking at him. Categorizing, systematizing can be convenient ways of locating strangers or outsiders. Many of us are troubled by those who depend upon systems that fix people in place, erasing individuality and difference, imposing invisibility. In *THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN*, when the steamboat runs down the raft, the steamboat only stopped for eight minutes because "steamboat men never cared much for raftsmen." The system or the American disposition? The rise of industry; the anonymity of crowds? In *MOBY DICK*, Ishmael perceives a futility in classification. Cetology, "a science of whales," has been devised to categorize all existing whales without exception. Ishmael decides that the noblest structure, like the cathedral at Cologne, have always been left unfinished. "This book," Melville wrote, "is but the draft of a draft. May God keep me from ever completing anything.."

An appropriate pedagogy of thoughtfulness might well include a space for incompleteness, replacing the "formulas and oratory" of which Rich wrote. There would still be room for the logical and the predictable, for the formal perfections of geometry and calculus if we teach these as languages, alternate perspectives creating new meanings in our world.,. We might avoid closures and the hunger for final solutions. We might enable our students to keep their questions open on the definition of terrorism, on what is called "the surge," on the seeming insolubility of the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate.

Seeking a pedagogy for such moments, I think of Hannah Arendt's warning how "a heedless recklessness or a complacent repetition of empty truths have become distinctive traits of our time." She went on to ask for a reconsideration from the vantage point of our newest experience and our most recent fears. Then she made a proposal that should be taken seriously by classroom teachers at all levels.: "It is nothing more than to think what we are doing." She had in mind the need to avoid the banality, the one-dimensional thinking of the functionary, the bureaucrat. And it would seem she had in mind the kinds

of dialogue that released individuals in their relationships to think what they were doing. It must be in part a matter of thinking how they, as distinctive persons, reflect on the way they are in the world as men or women, scholars or technicians, full members of the culture or newcomers, situated bodies, live perceivers. It may be a matter of consciousness, of each one being able to reflect on the contents of her/his own consciousness.

To move from a pedagogy of thoughtfulness to a pedagogy of imagination is to enlarge and expand what is taken to be thoughtfulness--to integrate or bring into relationship the perspectives opened to people freed to think what they were doing. They may be perspectives linked in such a fashion as to provide a shared space for the diverse people, adult and young, inhabiting a school --or a town afflicted by a plague, or a hospital, a Prefect's office, an ocean beach, a sickroom. To imagine is to think of things being otherwise, not only that the town gates open and allow the "exiled" to return to their lives, but that (imagination not always being benevolent) the criminal Cottard can no longer escape the law by hiding in the locked town,

Theodore Adorno, in an essay called "Education after Auschwitz," made the point that violence and brutality and injustice seem to many people inevitable from time to time like earthquakes or tornadoes; and there is nothing left to do but to give in. For Adorno, critical thinking makes giving in far less likely: "As long as it doesn't break off, thinking has a secure hold on possibility....Open thinking points beyond itself." To say this is to suggest an intertwining, perhaps an interdependence of thoughtfulness and imagination. Paul Ricoeur spoke of imagination as a "passion for the possible." Emily Dickinson wrote that "imagination lights the slow fuse of possibility".

Clearly, they were not concerned, as we cannot be concerned with "castles in the air." There must be a conception of the feasible linked to the sense of possibility. And, as in the case of Dr. Rieux, a preoccupation with abstract feasibility cannot be permitted to overwhelm passion, feeling, and care. Turning from *THE PLAGUE*, which we know is a created thing. presenting us with an unreal world, we might ask ourselves about the way in which a participatory encounter with a work of art can open windows in consciousness. We might ask ourselves as well about the way in which imagination opens the way into a created Oran, a locked in town, citizens asking helplessly "why"? All this has to occur in our consciousness, that which carries us into the world and infuses our thinking with wonder and an always open possibility. There is no conclusion here--only visions of what might be, what ought to be, what might turn back upon itself, what is not yet. Rieux., the narrator, knew at the end that the tale he had to tell "could not be one of a final victory. It could only be the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions. by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers."