

Education as an Art
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BIOGRAPHY IN EDUCATION

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We are all individuals. Occasionally we fiercely defend our individual rights and freedom as a unique entity - a centric being which we call "I." Often we feel imprisoned within the physical vessel we call a body - sometimes striving to protect itself from other bodies with a will and independence of their own. We can easily sense the meaning of Schweitzer's 'reverence for life.'

'I am the life that wills to live in the midst of other life which wills to live.' Yet as we set great store by our independence, so do all men possess a deep desire to transcend the personal and unite with the lives of other beings around us. We bear the polarities of independence and social need and desire. We are caught in, or suspended within, a dynamic tension between our self and our fellows about us. The personal and the self transcendent are a rack we are hung upon by the very nature of our humanity. There is a deep desire in man to know and to love his fellows, in spite of his weakness, and the frailties of his companions. Here lie the real roots of our need for biography. We can glimpse for a moment or two the correspondences between men. We can measure and reaffirm the nature of our humanity - that we belong with all other men to mankind.

Out of the richness of the Hebrew testament come the words, "I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help ... my help cometh from the powers that transcend me but also these words help suggest to me a way to see biography - the hills we often lift our eyes to could easily dissolve in the mists of our imagination, to become the great men and women who have graced the earth in the march of evolving consciousness. There are so many such hills to which we can lift our gaze.

We can derive great strength from these mountains of success, travail and pain, and strength of purpose. Like us they have toiled to fashion their destiny and to attain their goals. Olympian beings they may seem, yet we search to disclose their 'humanity, their failings and their virtues. They were human too and they were our brothers. They have gone before, and thus can help us find our way over the tortuous terrain, we all have to negotiate. Through them, too, we reaffirm the nobility of man. We can value the purpose of pain and learn from those who have transmuted suffering into higher qualities and enrichment of being.

Biography is one vital dimension of education. In the first school year, no biographies are given. The wisdom of the fairy tales is a supra-personal picture of all men and all kingdoms of nature and heaven. An archetypal biography is revealed in the fairy-tales - a picture of before birth, life, death and rebirth, and the creative power and guidance in the universe. The struggle for direction and purpose is hidden behind these tales. The mission of the old traveling storyteller was not for amusement, nor entertainment, but one of instruction from the wisdom of the past.

In the second grade we will find the legends of the saints and animals. The stories of St. Francis, St. Jerome, St. Patrick, St. Valentine, bring before the children feeling-filled pictures of the highest of men given to the service of the earth and their fellows. It is easy to recognize the root of a future ecology here, but the essence is the picture of man as a near-perfected being in harmony with nature, himself, man and the beyond.

As the time of the awakening self-awareness approaches, the children feel themselves as separate beings or entities - they lose the world of fairy tales and fables, but gain a rich emotional expansion. Yet the path of isolation continues and deepens as they contract more and more into centric beings

within their own self-awareness. Thus, the role of biography becomes ever more vital, to unite them with their humankind. The biographies given are not vague and haphazard, leaping hither and thither through the centuries, but as far as possible they are related to the historical epoch of the particular grade. The third-graders, for example, take part in the colossal lives of the patriarchs of the Old Testament and the struggle for self-identity and knowledge of good and evil.

The fourth-graders meet the Norse legends, simply teeming with magnificently proportioned biographies that represent, as it were, a personification of all the faculties within emergent man and all the powers within the cosmos.

In the fifth grade, we reach the beginning of a historical consciousness, and pass on from the Ancient Indian, Persian, Egyptian, to Greek legends and history. Great beings speak out of these times to contribute to the waiting, open souls of the children, strengthening the inner life, giving direction and guidance deep below the threshold of waking consciousness. In the fifth grade the Greek spirit will again emerge to speak in her inimitable rhythm of the poetry, drama, beauty and courage of her sons.

As the sixth-graders encounter the Roman world, biography will give them a deep insight into the Roman manner of life. This will not be a brief excursion into a history of dates and facts, but a penetration into the hearts and minds of the citizens and luminaries of Rome and her world. History will not be "one damned thing after another" or "a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (James Joyce, *Ulysses*) but the emergence of a conscious mankind through meeting resistance and travail - a mirror of the individual path.

As the grades advance and the student approaches puberty, the value of biography intensifies. Remember that the Waldorf Schools perceive puberty to be far more extensive than a mere sexual maturity. Of course, the physical changes are an important consideration, but they are the outcome of a greater process, the descent to the earth in more ways than one. The adolescent is deeply aware of himself as a separate entity - he is confused by and sensitive to a host of new feelings that arise in him, and the nature of his physical changes. He is concerned with who he is and where he should go. This is the first time that he really senses what it is to be human - as an individual. The sense of loss, the withdrawal and sensitivity met with at the approach of puberty is another step in self-awareness. As the earthly physical development has reached a particular point, so the age of idealism and hero-worship arises. The young people are deeply concerned with the nature of life and human values. Here then is the gift of the biography. Men and women worthy of their esteem can speak to them from the past.

The struggle to live and grow will be demonstrated in a thousand ways in the incessant striving for self-development, in the failings and hypocrisies of men and in their virtues. As the ray of destiny penetrates the prism of life, it is manifest in a colorful spectrum, which will absorb and intrigue the young soul. All this is the food they need at this time. Men of courage, the intrepid explorers, will show themselves and men and women of compassion and idealism; myriads of qualities will reveal themselves through biography. Madame Curie, Galileo, Schweitzer, Braille, Lincoln, Einstein, Nobel, Helen Keller, Michelangelo, Raphael and Leonardo, Beethoven, will speak to them. There will be a balance of good and bad, the enlightened and the misguided, the tyrants and the saints, men who sacrificed their lives for human liberty, those who seek to heal and those who strive to understand. All the fruits of history can be brought to our students.

They will recognize the humanity in every man and feel it stir in their souls. They sense the nobility of the spirit of man - how men seek, how they lose the path, how they climb the heights. The young soul will respect this insight into the human life-span. He will be touched by the gentleness of an Emerson, the humility of a St. Francis, the brilliant failures of a Leonardo, the singleness of purpose of a Columbus, the resilience of a Madame Curie, the crushing burdens of a Beethoven, the equanimity of a Buddha, the invincibility of a Moses, the refined love of an Elizabeth

Barrett-Browning, the idealism and sacrifice of a Martin Luther King, the soul-searching of Augustine or of a Tolstoy, and the hate of a Hitler, the ruthlessness of a Rhodes, and the selflessness of a Gandhi.

All these dangers, enigmas and qualities are within our students as potential. The tempest and the wilderness that faced those who have passed will come to face those who have to come. Yet we will encourage them to see beyond the obscuring mists and impeding marshes to the clear sun covered peaks that are the finest heights of human achievement.

Biography possesses remedial qualities, too, for we can bring a great life to bear on the particular problems of a child. This can be related to and guided by the temperaments. The choleric will grasp for the leaders of men, their nobility of purpose, or will perceive the narrow greed that drove them on to self-destruction. The melancholic will drink deep the draught of lives dedicated to the overcoming of suffering, or those who sink beneath the weighty burden of life. The sanguine will be delighted by a fast-changing life, the eagerness, the vitality and vivacity of a many faceted purpose, or the dissipation by the temptations that lie along the way. The phlegmatic will be encouraged by those who stand resolute and firm, upholding their tasks in spite of the floods and storms that inundate them, or recognize those who fail to act when the time is ripe - monuments to lost opportunity.

The intuitive teacher can find in Biography an endless creative source of healing and balance that can be directed to the needs of his pupils. He can find biographies that reflect on a grand scale the basic problems of a particular student. Intuitively, he can sense that both a particular student and a particular biography reveal the same fundamental problems, thus the biography can be given as a story, as drama, or in artistic form, in poetry or music. In the middle and lower grades the biography must not be explained, for deep in the metabolism of the soul there will be recognition. In adolescence or college, biography can be used as another, more conscious medium by the counselor.

Biography is a perpetual source of tolerance and compassion for the vices and virtues of man. Biography can stimulate a feeling that beneath the integuments of creed, color and nationality, of success and failure, all men are brothers, for we all must travel the road between birth and death. Herein lies one of the great roots of an enlightened humanism; a foundation for manhood ... and as the light of a higher awareness dawns within the young person, so will he sense the common thread woven into the complex tapestry of all men - and the creative, directional spirit within himself and his fellow travelers.