

Neal: Education through a Philosophy of Deepening the Hunger

In the research based, data driven, cost benefit analysis society that we currently live, education is now being thought of as only an economic good. I prefer to think being educated in some form or fashion as a virtue. Virtue is akin to the Greek concept of areté, which means excellence and implies that virtues are things we need to become our best selves. Economic goods are items we purchase as means to an end. As an economic good, many are evaluating education by its ability to quantitatively enhance the individual's life without much consideration being given to its ability to go beyond mere enhancement and examine its ability to reconfigure what it means for that individual to be enhanced. Instead of being able to buy new clothes or a new car because of their education, the individual now thinks of how they can make Mississippi better or even make the world better.

Personally, the quest of making the world better has taken many turns and twists, but has now concluded with me becoming professionally something I was in private, for most of my life, a philosopher. Although there are many ways to do so, I use philosophy as a tool to spur in the individual a sense of what is vital in life and to throw a shaft of light on the individual experiences of the students and those of others, so that they might develop a profound sense of the interrelatedness of life, to paraphrase a quote from Howard Thurman.

As a Morehouse undergrad, I once heard Dr. Delores Stephens (my English professor) say, "the only thing people purchase and they don't want want their money's worth is education." She continued, "I am going to insure that you get all that you have purchased!" This statement epitomized, for me, the necessity of all teachers on all levels to challenge the minds of their students and to even stretch them beyond their preconceived notions of what is possible for their futures. I have been fortunate, in my life, to have had many such wonderful teachers who gave a great part of themselves so that this bruised reed was never broken, nor was the smoldering wick of my desire ever put out. These teachers understood the gravity of investing in the future and they were willing to commit their lives as, not only servants of their communities, but servants of humanity as a whole, because they could not predict the many places that the products of their effort were destined to go.

Education, however, is necessarily dialogical or conversational. Even if there is not a human teacher present, students have the ability to learn through their attempts to understand the world around them. In short, students can learn when they are moved to gain knowledge of their world, whether for survival or to increase the pleasure of their experience. What does this mean? Education depends as much or more on the students desire to know their world, as it does on their educational experience. When the student is hungry for knowledge, their mental bellies can be filled, but when they are not hungry the world suffers.

The student's hunger to know must be deepened so that the inevitable obstacles of life also become learning experiences. According to Aristotle, "All human beings by nature desire to know," but if their appetite for knowledge is not sufficiently stimulated, then fables, superstitions, and old wives tales quickly become substitutes. This type of knowledge can quickly turn into a deep fear of the other. It is incumbent of teachers to creatively present and represent the world to students, both immediate and distant, always with the understanding that the future builders and leaders must not be limited by a shallow imagination or petty prejudices created by insufficient knowledge. When students are not limited, they learn to interpret and translate meaning for themselves. They also become committed to the continuation and betterment of the

world through better ideas, while opposing its destruction. This requires, of the teacher, a thorough knowledge of the subject matter combined with a bit of artistry, realizing that communication becomes the outward performance of inward knowledge.

What then is the student's role? The student must understand their basic role is to say yes or no at the appropriate time. Essentially, in order to be educated, there is a certain responsibility the student must accept and if the student refuses, the process comes to an abrupt halt. The educational process is initiated first by the student's inward hunger to know and then on a more formal level, upon being presented with information from their teacher, the student takes charge of their future by intimating yes and continuing their journey or with a no there is either a discontinuance, delay, or a chance to accept another journey. In either case, the choice to initiate the journey of education is ultimately the student's to take. Of course I realize that a quality education does not exist everywhere, but by being open to receiving an education the student will begin to recognize learning opportunities, even in sparse conditions.

Lastly, the world is not does exist in a static state, waiting only for the next generation to take their places. It is analogous to a lump clay waiting for the next generation to happen upon it, with a full frontal assault, armed with only intellect and imagination. So, each student must dream and dream big, allowing their dreams to set the baseline of the possible, knowing that they cannot even dream as great as their true ability. Also, institutions of learning must become citadels of the ideal, knowing that within their walls something great is happening. Within their walls, there is a gathering of the next generation of great minds and they have come to participate in their own future. Within in those walls, decisions are being made concerning what the world will be, realizing that it is truly left to them. Those of us who have had our turns must do as the philosopher, Martha Nussbaum says, cultivate humanity!