

On Love, Learning and the World-wide Tragedy of Public Schools, a set of eighteen metaphysical miniatures

(0) *Talent?*

Everyone
appreciates
the wild flower's
showy brilliance, but
few care to follow the slow,
steady ripening
of the seed.

(1) *Schools?* A place where the gift of wonder becomes the terror of exams. A child who can no longer tell the difference between a real question and a test, by what path do we lead it safely into the unknown?

(2) *Tests?* Where the natural fear of outward attack gets mixed up and confused with the inward fear of failure. Watched carefully, we see that the fear thus generated folds into the body movements of a child at every level of subtlety, and, with time, causes any number of unnecessary permanent distortions. Later in life, in music, this leads to a forced, strident quality of sound which is never quite in tune, does not combine well with others and does not project well in space; in dance, the holding of tension caused by fear can lead to a debilitating rigidity and fragmentation of the primary head-neck-and-back relationship. If this goes on long enough, we will actually begin—completely unawares—to compose pieces which fit the distortions, and to a certain extent, even learn to enjoy playing and listening to them. Still later in life, pain and injury can bring this cycle to an abrupt stop. Why then do we not see this? Perhaps it is because, as F.M. Alexander used to say, "*When people are wrong, the thing that is right is bound to be wrong to them.*"

(3) *Questions* open the door into the unknown, *tests* shut it.

(4) The discipline which is imposed from without becomes the hurt carried within.

(5) The incessant impulse to test whatever thought thinks it can measure has in the Western educational tradition largely corrupted both the wisdom and the intelligence which would see the necessity of doing without them.

(6) In all learning, the first thing we need to do is create a space free of fear.

(7) *Awards? Competition?* Why do we not see that the sweet offered as a reward is the other side of the same stick of punishment we rightly refuse to use?

(8) Which mother has not suffered countless hours watching her child struggle with the mystery of writing sound down on paper? Learning to spell ought to be a gentle, general movement, which, like learning to play an instrument in tune, only very gradually becomes more and more precise. But we should not forget, that, in English, how we write an 'ie' sound—there are some 16 different ways—always has a certain arbitrariness about it, while playing a perfect fifth perfectly never does.

(9) A mistake is a mistake repeated. Even the best of performers can make a habit of practicing, sometimes for years, the wrong notes. Like a famous, world-class pianist, when asked why he never seemed to make mistakes, once said, "*Well, Sir— of course not. I don't practice them!*"

(10) Reading hours at a time narrows the mind to the stuffy confines of a room without windows; Listening, whether in or out-of-doors, is much more alive; it allows the eyes to roam freely about, no longer straining in a small, constricted field. Listening allows for great space. And a polyphony of simultaneous, complementary movements. Try it. Experiment. Take what you read and record it in your own voice, or let a computer speak it for you. Then go outside to some special, quiet place and listen. Watch how easily you can follow the flow of what is being said and still observe the flowers, the birds, the wind in the trees, the movements of clouds and weather. Watch how that, if you go on to write yourself, with time, much more space will begin to enter in the rhythms of your prose. And if you compose, you may soon discover for yourself the most basic of all movements in music:—the back and forth of sound and silence. Listening. It is the most beautiful and primary of all arts.

(11) In the Arts, the intolerance of little mistakes in performance points to too much tolerance of the far bigger mistake of repeating over and over again the same pieces:— 'perfectly'.

(12) Every mechanically reproduced image of a natural world, whether it be the photograph of a flower, or the recording of a violin, must be re-composed by the viewer or listener in order to bring it back to life. In a way, this is rather like healing the image. This, of course, presupposes a long-standing intimate relationship with the original, or with real plants and acoustic instruments. Children who are for whatever reason denied this primary relationship with things natural can only with great difficulty re-create pictures or sounds in this way. Theirs has become in part a 2nd-hand world of ghost images projected on the proverbial walls of a high-tech cave.

(13) The essence of natural learning is sympathetic love resonance, in which a strong inward movement of intelligence awakens a similar movement in another. When you know a path by heart and yet still discover it anew every time you walk it, the child will follow your footsteps perfectly without giving it a single thought. When you love the path you walk, the first step holds all subsequent steps, just as the first sound of a poem or a symphony holds implicitly the whole story it is about to tell. A child senses this instantly. The integrity, the craft, the truth of it. The story is passed on; the seed has been planted. And most wonderfully—afterwards, the first thing a child wants to do is share or teach what he or she has learned to a friend. This is why the master / apprentice relationship ought to be seen as something precious and sacred, and as the learning space of choice in all creative traditions.

(14) When we do not love what we teach, order and discipline, which naturally come from within, must be imposed from without. The result is learning spaces which are all too similar to industrial farms, with their impoverished monocultures in tight, neat rows, weak plants that can't take care of themselves, harvests which fatten but do not nourish, and a soil which hungers for proper respect and care.

(15) Anything we force once, we'll have to force twice. Force it three times, and we risk jamming the lock of a door that at first was not even there.

(16) Learning: it can only be measured by love and compassion, which everyone can recognize, but no one can measure.

(17) The easiest thing to teach the young is also the very most important: Love is like pure, living water; wherever it is present in abundance, life flourishes.

