The Stunting of Creative and Mental Growth; or, the Evolution and Pollution of Ideas

Nelson Dodson

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THE STUNTING OF CREATIVE AND MENTAL GROWTH;
OR, THE EVOLUTION AND POLLUTION OF IDEAS

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Submitted: August 28, 1970

Advisor: Mr. Fred Meyer
TO

MARGARET K. PHILLIPS,

THE CITY OF CHICAGO

and

TO ALL MY CLOSE FRIENDS I'VE COME TO VALUE MORE

THAN MY EDUCATION
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I think it takes someone of supernatural powers not only to comprehend but to explicate the flaws in our vocabulary, in order to make words seem tangible and instantaneous so that you might share my contempt for the routine of things.

Being presumptuous enough to assume that I am this supernatural entity -- and necessarily so, in order to maintain my sanity while dealing with the workings of my mind -- I will attempt to examine creative and mental growth, its pollution by institutions and other factors, and show the spontaneous evolution of ideas in my own works as well as those of others, which might help combat, if not eliminate this pollution.

And finally, perhaps most importantly, I will try to show how this experience in dealing with the above will bear upon my attitudes in a teaching situation. I will explain how I approach a classroom, and give some objective suggestions which could, I feel, improve the system.

I ask only that this writing be read in its entirety before making any reflective evaluations, either for or
against, and that you the reader not expect me to be either professorial or prudent -- both would interfere with what I'm trying to say and consequently how it is said.
CHAPTER TWO

AN ADMONISHMENT AS A PREREQUISITE TO CHAPTERS THREE THROUGH SIX

first thoughts

"Never explain, never apologize," runs the old maxim, and therefore never write an introduction. I've already conceded to that -- and even if I hadn't I must explain further, though not apologize here.

My very first thought was to change my thesis proposal, feeling the proposal I had submitted a gargantuous undertaking and questioning my competence. I have scraped my brain against its casing for weeks now wondering how to say what I have to say without turning this dialogue into a subjective homily -- which I've been warned against -- and how to do what I've set out to do without stopping each alternate line to explain and in some instances justify what has been written.

The only conclusion I could come to after what seemed a perpetual ponderance of alternatives, was to make my introductions (I use the plural here because I consider this chapter an extension of the introduction) as clear as I can possibly make it so there will be no need whatsoever
to translate or justify any succeeding chapters.

The warning received against making this a sermon caught me somewhat off balance and made this chapter a necessity. I'd like to make this writing, or label this writing a book rather than a thesis in order to justify what will appear at times as a homiletic approach to the material being covered.

Wherever possible the material will be endorsed with objective research but I refuse to let this become a burdening requisite to my dialogue.

Allowing each chapter title to be a point of departure, I would like to proceed as much as possible in a spontaneous manner letting my mind and words flow through the chapter at hand without interruption, except when I deem it necessary to quote someone whose writings express concisely and explicitly what I am trying to state.

language

Giving forth an admonishment as a chapter title was intended for those readers not likely to understand what I am submitting or for one reason or another are put off by the language, punctuation or spelling.
Insistence on hard-headed clarity at all costs, proper spelling, proper language and proper punctuation will destroy all I am setting out to do in this composition and is, in any case, an insult to the way the human mind functions.

If this becomes nothing but a challenge for some depraved soul to spend hours in the library counting grammatical imperfections, let it be his pacifier -- let it be whatever one wants it to be. This is what I'm trying to say. I want to cross barriers and erase old categories of what is and what is not proper -- who is to say?

In plain English gentlemen, in plain English -- everything is relative and nothing is relative. If it becomes necessary for me to say "fuck" I will not suppress that thought. This is indeed a curious word -- fuck -- the most common expletive in the English language.

"One of the few words left in our language which still maintains its emotional power and purity, yet for all practical purposes is illegal." 1

I agree with Jerry Rubin, a young militant, when he says the young people of today, including myself, are ensconced in a contradiction over this word -- on one hand we demand the right to say it and on the other we want it to remain illegal so it will not be castrated by societal

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abuse. Even the New Yorker, in the February 28, 1970 issue agrees and I quote: "Its absence will result in boredom and indifference in the face of everything that should have remained fascinating."

This is not an area of the word I would like to explore because it could obviously demand a paper unto itself. I would however like to present two views on the socio-political manifestations of the word "fuck", one from a man admired by many of the "older generation", Sir Herbert Read, and one admired by many of the "younger generation", Jerry Rubin. Sir Herbert Read says:

"Pornography is a social problem: it is a commodity brought into existence by certain characteristics of a highly developed civilization. The problem cannot be solved by any form of prohibition or censorship. Any form of censorship, political or moral, inhibits the development of spiritual values. Morality itself is strengthened by liberty."

And quite differently Jerry Rubin:

"How can you separate politics from sex? It's all the same thing: Body politic.

POLITICO-SEXUAL REALITY: The naked human body is immoral under Christianity and illegal under American law. Nudity is called 'indecent exposure'. Fuck is a dirty word

because you have to be naked to do it. Also it's fun.

When we start playing with our 'private parts', our parents say 'Don't do that'. The mother commits a crime against her child when she says 'don't do that'.

We're taught that our shit stinks. We're taught to be ashamed of how we came into the world -- fucking. We're taught that if we dig balling, we should feel guilty.

We're taught: body pleasure is immoral!

We're really taught to hate ourselves!!

I feel they are both saying the same thing -- whether you agree with me or not is irrelevant -- both show the reality of the term "fuck" and in both contexts I plan to utilize this word, or any other word I need, to make a point as I see it. This is my admonishment, as it were.

In concluding this chapter I would like to reiterate what I said in the introduction. "I ask that this writing be read in its entirety before making any evaluations or releasing the wrath of the red pencil or the flaming tongue."

From this chapter forth I had not wanted to prostitute my thought process by correcting spelling, punctuation, or sentence structure, but I was encouraged to do otherwise. (You will if you want a MFA degree!) I wanted it to remain as written, but....

CHAPTER THREE
THE STUNTING OF CREATIVE AND MENTAL GROWTH

I

"What did you learn in school today,
Dear little boy of mine?
What did you learn in school today,
Dear little boy of mine?
I learned that Washington never told a lie,
I learned that soldiers seldom die,
I learned that everybody's free,
That's what the teacher said to me,
And that's what I learned in school today,
That's what I learned in school.

II

What did you learn in school today,
Dear little boy of mine?
What did you learn in school today,
Dear little boy of mine?
I learned that policemen are my friends,
I learned that justice never ends,
I learned that murderers die for their crimes,
Even if we make a mistake sometimes,
And that's what I learned in school today,
That's what I learned in school.

III

What did you learn in school today,
Dear little boy of mine?
What did you learn in school today,
Dear little boy of mine?
I learned our government must be strong,
It's always right and never wrong,
Our leaders are the finest men,
And we elect them again and again,
And that's what I learned in school today,
That's what I learned in school.
IV

What did you learn in school today,
Dear little boy of mine?
What did you learn in school today,
Dear little boy of mine?
I learned that war is not so bad,
I learned about the great ones we have had,
We fought in Germany and in France,
And someday I might get my chance,
And that's what I learned in school today,
That's what I learned in school."

So, the time comes, S-Day (school day) -- you're ridin your tricycle down the street at least 9½ miles an hour and you are abducted by your own mother. She picks you up bike and all and carries you in the house and it ain't even dark yet and you were going to play poker with the kid down the street's baseball cards till at least 7:00 but mom says ya gotta get up and go to school and that's cool man, all the big kids go to school and play kickball and learn about spaceships and all that good shit (your mom don't want you to say shit but she didn't say you couldn't think it).

So you get up next day and it ain't even light yet and your mom puts you into all them stiff new clothes and feeds you two bowls of Maypo and forty-two glasses of milk ta make ya learn better.

Then your mom walks you to school and you're a little embarrassed cause she's a little chubby but you get all excited cause you got new shoes with at least ten inch heels and you're

gonna be tall — cept everybody else got new shoes too — shit!

Finally your mom takes off and you're all alone, well almost alone, there's a lot of other kids there too but your mom left and you so scared you almost pee your pants.

"Good morning children" — what was that?, nobody talks like that — "good morning children", this grey haired lady ten feet tall and nine feet wide with yellow teeth all the way to her ears, did it. "Now you say, good morning Mrs. Bunn." So we say good morning miz Bunn, then we run through the Lord's Prayer 37 times, the pledge of all-eegents (that's how she told us to say it) 28 times and by that time it's time to go home. Man my head hurt so much I couldn't even put my dominoes away.

Next day, after we do our "good mornings" (still don't sound right) and our prayer, we get ready to do our pledge to the flag and this kid (he's smart, whew!), Johnny S. says "we did that yesterday, how come we got to do it again today?"

So Miz Bunn gives us the story about us all being proud of our free country and tells us we couldn't say the pledge of all-eegents in Russia and we say wow! Russia must be a bad place, can't even say the pledge of all-eegents, man. So
we're all glad as hell we're in a free country and when Miz Bunn says get your ass up this minute and say the pledge, man we know she means it. (She didn't really say ass, but we didn't wanna go to bad old Russia).

After we did that she (Miz Bunn) started us on the alphabet (I sure am glad I'm gonna be smart, I thought that was soup) -- "A, this is a A, as in apple" -- so far so good, don't look like a apple though -- "B, this is a 'B'" -- I know that one, got stung once and my ear swelled up somethin terrible, had to fold it over twice to get it under my hat. "C, this is a 'C'".

School sure is hard, in two days we learned the Lord's Prayer, but I don't understand the words, the pledge to the flag -- don't understand that either, how to be polite, all about those bad bad people in Russia and a "B" is a letter, not to be mixed up with the stinging kind and not the kind of letter you mail.

Thus begins the institution called school and the wanton indoctrination and molestation of millions of tiny minds.

Any student can look around him and realize that the schools are not being run for him, they're being run for everybody else but him. Our schools are shallow sheltered institutions whose concern for sustaining tradition far outweighs their concern for real education.
In light of the way schools are run today their greatest contribution is in teaching students patience, forbearance and the ability to survive the bullshit which they are fed which in turn gives them the strength to survive in a situation which is generally absurd. If they are learning this perhaps preparation of sorts has resulted from the unintentional catalyst of the school -- anyway, Socrates, too, corrupted the youth of his time, it was said.

The school today makes active students sit at immovable desks studying mostly useless information. For those who believe in such a school -- that is those uncreative individuals who want docile uncreative children who will fit into a society whose standard of success is money -- let them start their own schools. Let the public schools be freed. The youth of today are beginning to see the absurdity and vulnerability of the system, and until the system changes there will be passive and active dissent.

The common error teachers are making today is mistaking good behavior for good character; they prize docility and suggestability. The student becomes a slave: he must be silently obedient; he cannot change his slave status and integrate with his "masters" and, paradoxically, he may be paying money to an institution for this kind of treatment. The "Uncle Toms" are rewarded by a pat on the head while the militants are clobbered with poor grades. The teacher decides the
war strategy because he controls the weaponry. The teacher who uses grades as weapons should be charged with this child molestation I mentioned earlier. But this is no war crime according to the rules, yet teachers fail to realize that each failure is his failure, each moment spent on punitive grading is a reflection on his teaching ability.

Such teachers conduct inquisitions. They reject the slower learner and pounce upon the creative student like a flock of vultures, drain his blood, feed on his carcass and lick his bones — like the army, draining the last ounce of strength from its rightless soldiers before their time is up.

Today's schools which stress good grades and advancement only for cooperative subservience is generally harmful to the character, intellect and love of learning in children. The unfounded, unproved assumption that a child will not grow or develop unless he is forced to do so, is a major problem in today's schools.

Children learn early in life that for some unknown reason they must not talk about many of the things they think about and are interested in. So teachers wait until a child is snowed under by fear and troubles until they realize he needs someone to talk to without that person showing anger; someone who is sympathetic and will listen. Must we wait until he
needs psychiatric help and will tell only a doctor what he could have told anyone willing to listen sympathetically and honestly? Do we have to wait until a student's fears mount and he is in a jam before giving him a chance to say what he thinks?

This fear can be a terrible thing in a child's life. Fear must be eliminated: Fear of disapproval, fear of punishment, fear of adults and fear of God. Only hate can flourish in an atmosphere of fear. Please don't misunderstand, I'm encouraging freedom from authoritarian fears, not suggesting a license to flaunt such freedom. We have got to make education something that students want, for nothing will be accomplished by shoving courses down a student's throat like a piece of rotten meat only to have him throw them up and run from them.

In order to achieve this elimination of fear -- and seemingly irrelevant dispersing of rancid subjects -- the teacher must have the conviction that all students can become first class learners in the right situation. Many schools disregard the fact that you can have the most startling learning process in your life around some table discussion or outdoors or anywhere. Education should be a process of mutual discovery treating the students as colleagues in solving a problem. Yet even when this kind of a learning situation takes place, and many schools are trying it, teachers are still strangers to their students. Students want to
communicate so badly, but can't get past the teacher dignity barrier (Dr., Professor, Mr., Mrs.). Teachers are horrified by first-name relationships yet can't understand why their students back off and are so cold and polite to them. This is not the only problem, nor is there only one answer; I give my students the freedom to call me what they like. One student of mine called me "dirty hippie" until he realized he enjoyed my class. I then became, through no coercion on my part, Mr. Dodson. But there should be built up, in some way or another, as much intellectual intimacy between a student and teacher as there is emotional intimacy between husband and wife.

It is safe to say that the only learning which takes place in classrooms is that which is communicated by the structure of the classroom itself. How many teachers would list the following as their aims in a classroom?:

1. Passive acceptance is a more desirable quality than active criticism.
2. Recall is the highest form of intellectual achievement and the collection of unrelated facts is the goal of education.
3. The voice of authority is to be trusted and valued more than individual ideas.
4. Students' feelings are irrelevant in education.
5. There is always a single unambiguous answer to every question.

What makes a school so hard for thinkers is not that teachers can say much that doesn't make sense, but they say it in a way that sounds sensible, so that the child comes to feel, as he is supposed to, that when he doesn't understand it is his fault.

HERE IT IS!!!

NOTICE! NOTICE! NOTICE! NOTICE! NOTICE!!!

To all teachers:

Confiscate the carefree candy clutching carnival of childhood --- lecture loudly --- cleanse, cram and crush and cast kids with your gleaming golden rule, till they are all the same, ticky-tacky boxes --- stuff their sinuses with synthetic similies --- require recitation of irrelevant rituals ...........

SEE DICK COME.

LOOK AND SEE.

SEE DICK COME.

SEE DICK COME TO SCHOOL.

SEE DICK LEARN.

SEE DICK'S REPORT CARD.

SEE DICK FALL.
The function of a child is to live his own life, not the life of his anxious parents nor the life of the educator who thinks he knows what is best for him. All this interference and guidance on the part of adults will produce nothing but a generation of robots.

"Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For like goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday."

Most of us have been paper-clipped to desks, book reports, assignments and lectures for so long we fail to see beyond the blackboard antics of reading, writing and arithmetic and we accept them as sanctioned summaries someone else summarized. No wonder students think education is something that takes up space in their lockers.

You see, the student who is a good learner prefers to rely on his own judgement. He recognizes, especially as he gets older, that an incredible number of people don't know what they're talking about most of the time; as a consequence such a student

is suspicious of authority, especially any authority who discourages him from relying on his own judgement.

Another problem unfolding: Are we taught to think things in school?; the hell we are. We are taught to think words, not things! Children store words in their minds, undigested, so that they can spit them back on demand, but these words most often do not change anything, fit with anything or relate to anything. They are as empty of meaning as a flock of fucking parrots on individual perches. The subject matter is becoming an end in itself -- learn it -- memorize it -- the old convergent question routine -- one right answer, guess what I'm thinking routine.

Even children who achieve enviable grades are failing to learn much of what we should be teaching them: abstraction, curiosity and appreciation. It is impossible to legislate sensitivity or promote perception on command -- teachers must be able to see their pupils' needs, not just the subject matter. The means to an end must not become an end in itself.

"A teacher has to learn to go with the class, to respond to their desire to learn about things and not cut off their enthusiasm in the service of getting through the curriculum." 1

Another problem with this curriculum-centered teaching method is the atrocities it encourages, atrocities no educator in his right mind would want to promote: cheating!

Children are more often than not forced to cheat because of the "right answer syndrome" and the "You'll flunk syndrome". Unfortunately, aside from being against the rules, a child who gets his answers through illegitimate means and gets credit for knowing what he doesn't know is harmed twice — first he doesn't learn the material and secondly he comes to believe a combination of bluffing, guessing, mind reading and stabbing at clues is what school is all about. (See, The Cheating Scandal, from Teaching as A Subversive Activity.)

It is easy to see with all that is going on about us why students are bored in school. With today's fast-paced news media children find out from television, newspapers and radio what has happened just minutes earlier, while what they learn in school is, to them anyway, ancient history. For a few examples:

**SCHOOL**

Science -

"The hookworm is a parasitic member of Nemathelminthes, common in the southern part of the United States." 1

or

"Einstein was born on March 14, 1879, at Ulm, Germany. The family moved soon, however to Munich, where his father . . . . . . . . . 2"

**NEWS HEADLINES**

COASTAL STATES UPSET

BY NERVE GAS

MERCURY IN SEEDS AND

AIR THREATEN MAN

DRUG ABUSE UP 200%

FAA ASKED TO CURB

NOISE POLLUTION

KILLER SMOG


2. Encyclopedia Britanica, 1960, p.1345
"George Washington never told a lie and neither did LBJ." 1

Give the dates of the beginning and end of the War of the Roses.

"Shakespeare was born in 1564 and was baptized in the parish church of Stratford on Avon ..." 2

"the theorem follows readily from a beautiful balancing property which Archimedes discovered..." 3

And last, but by no means least, there is gym -- I say not least because you can go through most any high school or college with straight A's and not get a diploma because you flunked gym. It isn't that I'm against physical fitness -- I played four years of football -- but a typical gym class for me and many others, from what I've seen, runs something like this ............... "All right you bunch of punks, I'm head jock in this class and anyone don't do what I tell 'em gets his teeth knocked out." (At least we knew where we stood.) "Since I'm too lazy and

stupid to teach you guys nothin' we are gonna play battle-ball, right, right? Now, all my nine men on this side (football players) and the other 63 punks on the other side. My men, since there are only nine in this class, have no boundaries, you other guys don't cross the center line........"

So, what happens is you have nine guys six feet tall, weighing 200 pounds each, chasing 63 guys five feet tall, weighing 98 pounds, all around the gym beating them to death with rubber balls and sending them to the school nurse with multiple bruises so she can pat them on the head (ouch!) cause she is not allowed to treat them or give them aspirin even. This is physical fitness? But you take it or you flunk, or you get harrassed or the coach calls you a sissy.

But you must have gym to graduate, this is called a sequential learning system, you know -- English ain't history and history ain't science and science ain't music and music ain't art and music and art are minor subjects and a subject is something you take and once you've taken it you've had it and once you've had it you're immune to it and need not take it again. This has been referred to as the vaccination theory of education.

"Our schools are crazy. They do not serve the interests of adults, and they do not serve the interests of young people."
They teach 'objective' knowledge and its corollary, obedience to authority. They teach avoidance of conflict and obeisance to tradition. They teach equality and democracy while castrating students and controlling fellow teachers. Most of all they teach people to be silent about what they think and feel, and worst of all, they teach people to pretend that they are saying what they feel.\footnote{1}

Have you ever noticed that in moments of creativeness, those rather happy moments of vital interest, there is no sense of repetition, no sense of copying? Such moments are always new, fresh, creative and most importantly, happy. (A justification for art perhaps?)

I believe that one of the fundamental causes of the disintegration seen within our society is repetition and copying, the worship of the past, and blind obeisance to authority. Since our whole physiological balance is thrown off center by an undue surrender to such authoritarianism, we must free ourselves from this in our schools, if we are to think, be creative, survive.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE EVOLUTION OF IDEAS, THE POLLUTION OF IDEAS AND THE THOUGHT PROCESS IN GENERAL

"The only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing -- to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts."

Ideas are evolved; they cannot be forced upon you, which is too often the case in schools today at all educational levels.

This chapter, as well as the following one, is based on those concepts laid down by Edward De Bono in a book called "New Think". This book deals with the thought processes I feel are necessary to function as a creative or thinking individual: vertical thinking and lateral thinking. Vertical thinking is the process by which one takes the most logical and meticulous approach to solving a problem while lateral thinking explores all different ways of looking at something, rather than choosing the most promising way and pursuing it until exhaustion or conclusion.

I'm not saying here that one of these approaches is more desirable than the other; after all learning is neither vertical or lateral, rather it is episodic. What I want to stress is that many people cannot think laterally and we are, with few exceptions, not taught to think this way. Very few new ideas

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can come about through the use of vertical thinking; both are needed in problem solving. After all, "It is not possible to look in different directions by looking harder in the same direction. No sooner are two thoughts strung together than there is a direction, and it becomes easier to string further thoughts along in the same direction than to ignore it. Ignoring something can be hard work, especially if there is not yet an alternative." 1

This "new think" is really old. King Solomon used it in his famed decision to have a child cut in half to expose the real mother of two claimants. The real mother gave the baby up rather than have it destroyed.

Creative people, unwittingly or not, have always used lateral thinking, but there is a practical need for everyone to use it.

It would be of little use to go into much detail in this chapter about this lateral thought process or the rationale behind the necessity for episodic thinking because it will become much clearer to see what I mean in the next chapter, by way of specific examples. I would, however, like to cover, as briefly as possible, why institutional insecurity and interest in vertical thinking pollutes ideas, and as I promised to do in the introduction and chapter heading.

The previous chapter shows in many ways and areas how school forces students to think only vertically and stunts their mental growth by not encouraging lateral thinking. Now I would like to deal with the thwarting of the thought process in the arts, which

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is, supposedly, inherently a lateral process.

Starting with grade zero or kindergarten, students are given meaningless tasks to do which make limited and narrow judgments on their eager minds. Students are given a cutout circle, a set of ears, eyes and a nose, and a pot of paste and told very methodically how to paste them together to form the head of Easter Bunny, the snowman or Daddy or—what-have-you. Even when they are given the relative freedom of working with finger paints or poster paints more often than not, teacher steps in with her ideas of what is good and what is not good, often even helping or reworking what the child had been delighted with but moments before. This is not the time to interfere, during creative moments.

Later on in life, at the junior and senior high school level, students are given very specific assignments with crafts, sculpture, drawings etc. At the advanced level they go into the do-it-in-pencil, do-it-in-charcoal, do-it-in-ink, now do-it-in-watercolor syndrome. Why not do it outside on the road?

An art school or a college art department is a bit different than high school, but not much. The students are paying for the repetitious crap now. The school still dictates what the students should know and their audience is
more or less interested.

Now we come to graduate school -- you finally have a degree and can work toward your advanced one at a free and intellectual level on the things you are interested in within a moderately flexible schedule -- Bullshit!!! You still can't create as you wish, spontaneously and free of interference. You are encouraged to develop a style of your own, like the chick in the corner who's done 47 paintings of her gramma. Teachers are on your back to produce, produce, produce; you are told you are mature adults free to work as you wish while they scream at you and flunk you for not picking up your toys (paints, brushes, reference materials, etc.). You can't say fuck, you can't smoke, you get low marks for not being in class from Nine to Four even though you were there from Four in the afternoon until Two the next morning, working. (Poor teacher doesn't have anybody to talk to, sob, sob, sob.) Some guy comes into the studio screaming like a banchee that your work is dirty and he hates it and you tell him to go fuck himself and he turns out to be a teacher, a math teacher you never saw before in your life and you're threatened by the Dean to be expelled (or spanked) for "unbecoming student citizenship" and this fat guy next door with a bow tie who teaches Parameceums I and II tells you to turn your radio off and the Assistant Dean says wash the walls and the floors and
your face and wipe your ass and you stand there all nice and
neat and quiet and clean and polite as pie and say fuck it, and
go for a drink and you get reprimanded for leaving early. How
can you think or work at all, let alone laterally? Your mind
is so polluted with trivia and rules you just wanna go smoke
a joint or drink a fifth and say, fuck'em all, squares on
both sides.

Your thought process is so dedazzled you are awarded a bag
or nerve pills from your family doctor for your meritus achieve-
ments in endurance instead of a degree in painting from your
school. Why? Because you can't get it up, you can't get it
out, this thing you want to get down on canvas, cause you're so
depressed you just wanna suck on some broad's nipple full of
whiskey (Scotch).

I, being of questionably sound mind and body make
this
my last will and testament
until
next
CHAPTER.
CHAPTER FIVE
APPLICATION OF SPONTANEOUS AND LATERAL THINKING TO SPECIFIC WORKS OF ART

This is perhaps the most difficult chapter to write because I shall try to explain the thought process which has led to this thesis and explain what my work has been, and is, about.

In the last chapter I talked about the pollution of ideas and promised to give more tangible examples in this chapter. What I find happening as I begin writing is that this "spontaneous" and "lateral" thought process becomes harder to describe because the abstract "description" seems vague and removes all the vividness and excitement that are inherent in the process.

"Descriptions of the process tend to be obscure (and hence impressive) or else obvious and even tautologous." 1

Hopefully, between De Bono and myself, we can begin to see, through examples of his (De Bono) and those of mine, why this process of lateral thinking is both necessary and relevant in education and indicative of my work.

"Ideally the mind should be allowed to accept information haphazardly from any source. This information is not sorted or filed under different headings but is allowed free interaction.

Attention flits rapidly over the whole field, observing but not organizing, pausing long enough with an emerging idea to follow its development but not long enough to force it into a relevant mould. Ideally the mind should become an open house to information, a place where everything is welcomed, not only the invited or interesting guests but also the casual strangers or gate-crashers.¹

The difficulty most of us encounter here is that we prefer static definitions. We tend to classify without seeking to understand. This holds true socially at parties with the "gate-crashers" (he's probably the host), on the street with "niggers", "hippies", "wops", etc., and in the arts. Take "grey" for example. "Grey" is a definite classification; not the dynamic process of white becoming black or visa versa. So this "dynamic definition" still has possibilities while the static one would have grey just be grey.

Mr. De Bono did an experiment to try and find out if the human mind could experience a visual hallucination which it knew to be a logical contradiction. He hypnotized a person and suggested to him that he could see a square circle on the wall in front of him. So emphatic and so convinced was the subject that he could see a perfect circle which was at the same time a perfect square that he frustratingly tried to draw it though he knew it was not logically possible.

¹ ibid: De Bono, p.115
Logically possible it was not, but this is not to say it couldn’t develop into a new idea by simply experiencing something unexpected or illogical. A somewhat similar experience happened to me when I had an automobile accident. (See plate 3).

Persons in the visual arts have a supreme advantage in this kind of situation because they are capable of expressing an idea which is an excellent way of organizing it. The trouble is that organization usually means logical or vertical thinking. This is where most of my work enters the "picture". I get an idea and start to work on it: I mould it, shape it and watch it grow. When I feel I am forcing it, I stop, hopefully temporarily, because nothing can be gained by forcing.

This is where pollution first begins. You can’t stop, according to the rules. Even at critiques, the stipulation is made that the work you present be finished. I’m not sure I’ve ever finished a painting nor will I until I realize that I’ve exhausted every mental and technical possibility and feel satisfied, perhaps at age 90. This is one of the reasons I want to teach more than I want to paint and is perhaps subconsciously why I never sign a painting — it’s just too conclusive, too final.

What happens in schools, even in graduate school, is that your idea, your enthusiasm for the idea is lost because few ideas can ever be carried out without the approval of, or under the auspices of, someone else who controls the means or
the extent to which you try them out. When an idea is ready, logical strictness on my part or especially on the part of an instructor will not make the idea mature faster.

I realize that often I subject myself to the danger of jumping on an idea too early or trying too many ideas. Often this is where an instructor can and has been helpful by suggesting a direction to take. I've seen money lost by pouncing on an idea too early.

The Art Institute of Chicago -- where I attended school -- wanted to start a color photography class but instead of exploring all the possibilities they jumped on the idea and spent $15,000 on equipment which became obsolete almost the day of delivery. Again I stress the point that vertical (logical) thinking is as necessary as lateral thinking. The Art Institute, by adopting lateral thought, devised an alternate use for the equipment, and somewhat redeemed the initial idea. Yet, this is where it can become confusing. Even if the idea wasn't jumped on and was instead carefully planned, the original, logical thinking can be just plain wrong.

"When Dr. Robert Goddard developed his ideas for rocket propulsion and proposed that this was the only feasible form of power for space travel, many people maintained that a rocket could not work in space because there would be nothing for the rocket to push against. This was a misconception of the behavior
of rockets, which are propelled forward because the momentum of the hot gases rushing backward must be matched by the momentum of the rocket cases, which have to move forward."

"Many were the calculations which proved that heavier than air machines could not possibly fly. In the very same year that the Wright brothers flew, the American Congress passed a special bill forbidding the army to waste any more money on trying out flying machines, for Langley of the Smithsonian Institute has used army money to build an unsuccessful plane. (Ironically, his plane which crashed on take off, was subsequently shown to be capable of flight.) At that same time patent offices were refusing applications for flying machines much as they refuse applications for perpetual motion machines today." 2

Getting back to my examples and my work -- more often than not I have been forced to show I've been working, to subject a painting of mine, one which wasn't finished, to a critique of "finished work". These crits though beneficial to most were most often "quiet disasters" for me. Although, by sheer chance, and much to my enjoyment some of my works were "approved" as they were.

This kind of chance thing also happened to a friend of mine, Jim Thomas, an instructor at Rochester Institute of Technology. Jim had distributed posters for an opening of his "Plastic Light

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2. Ibid; De Bono.
Forms" at the Kravetz Gallery. While installing the show he decided at the last minute to include rough sketches and diagrams of his works. The logical thing to do was to include just the actual plastic pieces, but his last minute spontaneous decision saved the show in my estimation. His drawings were fantastic, often much more exciting than the finished pieces. Some of the light forms were at best glorified lamps.

This is the kind of lateral thinking which needs to be encouraged yet is so easily corrupted — suppose the gallery had said "no" to his drawings?

"With lateral thinking one wanders and wonders. Something may be noticed for the pure sake of noticing. There is no attempt to give it an importance, no attempt to explain it at once. The thing is just noticed. If it gives rise to an idea, then so much the better." 1

This is why I obliterare my studio walls with drawings, photos and anything of interest to me. Not that I'm going to use them but because it interests me and there's always a chance.

Chance is another element of thinking which you must be aware of but you must know how to use it, which I unfortunately sometimes don't. To experience chance you have to try almost everything. You have to paint as often as possible and get rid of inhibitions which interfere with your painting. The trouble is my inhibition in the Nine to Four studio schedule. Another

1. Ibid., De Bono, p. 105.
problem I have is knowing when to take what I have and stop. I
either overwork it or under-work it; either way it isn't finished.

Nobody takes chances anymore, except maybe in gambling, which
has a tangible incentive. I had submitted a moveable wall with
photographs on one side and a painting on the other to the grad-
uate show. (See plate 5). Because I had my "idea" junk in one
corner (drawings, cutouts, etc.) and photos over the rest of it,
and there were no other photographs in the show, my board was
doomed to rejection cause it didn't fit in. That board was
me, what I'm all about. The obstructing juror, however, finally
agreed to take a chance. By chance, if I do say so myself, it
was one of the better if not the most talked about piece in the
show -- both sides.

Look at the valuable contributions to progress initiated by
chance. Wireless waves were discovered when Hertz noticed a tiny
spark playing on a piece of apparatus across the room from the
equipment he was using. X-rays were discovered when Roentgen
forgot to remove a specially prepared fluorescent screen from
a table on which he was playing with a cathode ray tube. The
use of silver salts to make paper light sensitive for photography
was discovered when Daguerre and his associate noticed the image
left by a silver spoon which had been lying on an iodized metal
surface. We are not told these stories; these guys were just
geniuses and thought it up.
"It is not only single chance events that can lead to new ideas. Sometime a whole chain of circumstances provide the background."

Such is the case with my "penis painting" (See plate 6) and a strange yet cornball story it is. I had been dating this weird chick from the Eastman School of Music, an Oboe player, which every Freudian knows is a phallic symbol -- anyway we had just finished balling and she starts laying this rap on me about the strange shapes and sizes of the noble "organ". I think I was placed somewhere between a hummingbird and an elephant; well needless to say we started balling again and I temporarily forgot about our conversation. Next day I was drawing some cube-like forms trying different approaches to making them ambiguous by eliminating various lines in their construction when this guy walks up to my little cubicle and makes a reference to the boxes I was drawing as female genitals -- boxes, man I hadn't heard that one in years. So, to make a long story short, I began to doodle various shapes and sizes of penises flowing through the boxes on paper, then on the wall and finally this painting happened which was, if anything, a jest, a whimsical painting which got unbelievable reactions (explained in plate 7) -- a chance thing, play had led to a relatively successful painting.

The very usefulness of this play was its (the painting's) greatest asset. I was free from any preconceived design or commitment which allowed me to juxtapose things which otherwise would not have been arranged this way, to construct a sequence of events which would not have been constructed had I stopped "playing" and/or let others influence me.

Everyone and everything today is so serious it's unbelievable. This play I mentioned is actively discouraged by "logical" adults who point out its uselessness and define "growing up" as the responsibility to behave usefully.

"The apparent uselessness of play naturally discourages people from playing. Vertical thinkers are ashamed to play, but the only shameful thing is the inability to play." 1  

"During play ideas suggest themselves and then breed further ideas. The ideas do not follow one another in a logical progression, but if the mind makes no attempt to direct the ideas and is curious enough to pursue them, there will always be enough ideas." 2

Under the right classroom conditions you can encourage this "play" and chance interaction of ideas with the old method of "brainstorming". This is the method of putting ideas down as soon as they come to you and later selecting the better ones.

Dr. Leonard Barkin, a former instructor at R.I.T., was a staunch advocate of this approach and has used it successfully.
at all age levels, including me in his graphic design class. Another favorite approach of his is having students create designs by using colors in an arbitrary sequence or number system which in effect forces chance designs. Dr. Barkin is one of the most knowledgeable persons I've ever met on current and creative teaching methods; he falls short on but one area: knowing his students' interests and needs. If he could communicate with them on this point, he could hold his class long enough to give them his assignments. The only reason I interjected my personal criticism here is to show that what I'm talking about is more than a methods approach.

"Another useful technique for exciting new ideas is to expose oneself deliberately to a multitude of stimulants by wandering around a place that is full of things which would not be deliberately sought out. A general store, or an exhibition, or even a library could provide such a setting and it is more useful if the setting is not directly appropriate. Nothing is deliberately looked for, but instead of a searching attitude there is a readiness to consider anything that attracts attention. Often it is the most irrelevant objects that are capable of stimulating the mind towards new ideas. Nor is there any need to analyse or assign an importance to whatever is noticed. It is a junk-collecting attitude: anything that catches the attention for whatever reason is picked out. All the time in the back of
the mind is the problem for which the new idea is required.”

A further method of encouraging the chance interaction of ideas involves the deliberate intertwining of the many separate lines of thought that may at different times occupy the mind. Instead of keeping the lines of thought rigidly separate in the usual manner, instead of concentrating on one subject with deliberate exclusion of other distracting matters, everything is allowed to proceed concurrently with changes from one line to another being accepted as often as they occur. Thoughts developed in the pursuit of one subject are borrowed to advance another. Ways of looking at things which are conventional in one field become original when they intrude into another.” (I.e., Science and art) (See plate 1)

"Scientists are fond of using the excuse of serendipity to obtain support for work which does not seem to have an immediate practical application. The idea is that in the course of their search for something they may stumble across something quite different and of great value.”

For me concentration becomes at times a very sterile thing and I try to alleviate the boredom by using some of the above methods, or I break off completely and work on something which has nothing to do with the problem I’m working on e.g. another painting, a drawing, photography or a film. I think this is another reason most of my paintings are unfinished; I need more

2. ibid., p.113.
3. ibid., p.113.
self discipline in returning to my original problem.

"Initially the disinclination to settle on some line of thought will lead to a great restlessness and a search for distractions, but as skill in the use of lateral thinking increases, then ideas start to turn up. Confidence grows, and as it grows, thinking without consciously directing thought becomes easier; as it becomes easier it becomes more effective."  

CHAPTER SIX

TEACHING: MY IDEAS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD IT

A philosophy.

At this point it would be superfluous or at worst redundant to talk of any of my over-all attitudes toward teaching, so I would like to talk specifically on my background and present attitudes.

Obviously I have a very negative attitude toward what is being done in today's schools, but I've taken this attitude to make the point, that our schools are sheltered shallow institutions which need much changing.

I find myself, believe it or not, standing somewhere between the administration and the militants, attacked by the former for my outspoken debasement of the present system and attacked by the latter for not doing enough to change the system or for being involved with the establishment at all.

My contemporaries want to destroy "the system" while I've come to believe it must be fought for and changed, which will take time. Ever since my sophomore year in college, when I was literally turned on to education by Margeret K. Phillips at the Art Institute of Chicago, I've devoured every book on education I could get my hands on. While still in school I've taught at every available opportunity, in elementary schools in city and suburb, in high schools, adult classes and when this wasn't enough I did volunteer
youth work in the ghetto areas and taught black inmates at the Cook County jail in Chicago. Teaching and reading about teaching has been my life for the past three or four years, exposing myself to every conceivable situation which would further that goal.

I feel now, in reflection, it has hurt my visual work considerably but completion of my education will release me to rectify this situation, to learn as I am teaching others to learn.

The past has been good to me but in considering it in retrospect the bad things are those I remember and those which have made me want to teach my way.

My way—my way is to teach people to learn, to be free, to be creative, to be happy. Art is the only way I know to open people's minds to what is all around them—life—and life's longing for itself. To turn them on to new ideas and then, suddenly, to show them, once I've helplessly enraptured them, that living is an art so that they can use all the knowledge they have gained through all the subjects they have taken in these schools, to be.

On art.

As I mentioned, in the brief summary of my philosophy, my past has had a great influence on why, what and how I wish to teach.
I don't agree with many of the "new" teachers that students must be left alone to do what they want. If this sounds a contradiction to what I've been saying here I wish to apologize and clarify. By very definition this person could not be a student. As A.S. Neill would say, "I wish to give them freedom, not license."

Freedom to choose what they wish to learn, not the license to say how they should learn it. I'm amazed and extremely bitter about many past experiences with my education. I was amazed that students in the arts would feel that anatomy was too traditional to bother with and even more amazed that an administration at an art school would listen to them, but they did, and I never got a chance to take a course in anatomy.

I took a course in cubist drawing, not a history course, a drawing course and one of the most exciting and beneficial courses I've ever taken—yet my "contemporaries" were trying to throw it out of the curriculum; it was too traditional—but I loved it and I'd fight for the right to take it.

When I'm teaching drawing to students wanting to learn drawing I want to teach them inside and out—to draw what they know as well as what they see.

When I teach color to students wanting to learn color, I want to teach them why it is as well as that it is.
When I teach design to students wanting to learn design, I want to teach them what can be design, not what is design.

When I teach photography to students wanting to learn photography, I want to teach them that it is drawing with light that makes a photograph, not Kodak.

I will teach tradition, but not traditionally.

Times change and students change with these times. I will offer a minute segment of the vast quantity of knowledge that can be had for the asking. Those that wish to know what I wish to teach them should have the freedom to learn it, but I would be the last to force it upon them.
In concluding I wish to begin -- to teach.

I wish to teach tradition but not traditionally -- this is my thesis.
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Nilsson
I mailed your Mother's Day card!
Plate 7 & 8

Mr. Redman

Please repaint this surface with white until all traces of the painting are removed. These boards are not yours to paint with your work.

L. Burtin

do not remove sign until this is done
Plate 19
Plate 21