



David Barnes

A Philosophy of Education

A Brief Narrative

It was toward the end of a nearly perfect early spring day in the Pryor Mountains of Montana. I had spent most of it working on the compound of my friends the Big Day family who had lived for centuries on land that is now called

the Crow Indian Reservation. We were sitting on the ground naked and well broiled in front of an igloo shaped hut made from willow boughs and blankets. The little hut from which we had just emerged was a sweat lodge.

I had met Bill and his father about a year earlier. He was a student in an Art Appreciation class I had taught. After class, he would occasionally drop by my office to ask questions about the lectures or parts of the text he didn't understand. After satisfying the initial excuse for his visit, Bill would invariably shift the conversation to his family and to the rich store of oral tradition handed down to him from his fathers. The next semester I was invited to visit Bill's "little church" on the Crow reservation. The "little church" was the sweat lodge and, as its nickname implies, it is Bill's primary place of prayer, meditation and communication with the nature powers. I became a regular member of the congregation.

"Hey Billy," Bill's father elbowed him in the ribs, "I think maybe it's time to tell the professor about your vision."

Bill gave the ubiquitous native grunt in reply. He then explained that during his senior year in high school he had gone on a vision quest into the wilderness of the sacred Pryor Mountains. Bill's father and grandfather are Crow medicine men. Unlike many Native American children Bill had been raised in the traditional way. In his home the Crow language was spoken almost exclusively. Bill and his parents knew that he would have a very difficult time succeeding in college. Bill went on his vision quest to find some hope and blaze a trail into the future. He was alone for three days and nights without food or water with only his red stone pipe and a woolen blanket.

"I prayed for a vision to 'make a way' for me. I prayed for three days and nights. Then I seen him, a white man, and the vision said, 'he will make a way for you.'"

Bill looked a bit sheepish, and sporting an almost cherubic grin he said softly, "You are that man the vision showed me."

"How can you be sure of that?" I replied. Bill touched my balding pate, my short beard and then pointed to my prominent front teeth.

"That man, he had kind eyes and a face like a beaver." We all laughed. Then I fought away tears. For some time I had thought of teaching as a calling rather than a mere profession but it was not until that moment that I had any inkling of what that calling meant. I have come to know that to the Crow "to make a way" is to live out a vision. It can be a protocol or sacred way of doing something but it always implies a disciplined way of making an event or journey special. I have dedicated myself to "making a way" for my students.

Instructional Philosophy

As a teacher of arts and humanities, I see myself as a way maker. I wish to provide students with a friendly, non-threatening, exciting and accessible environment in which to encounter, perhaps for the first time, the richness of the humanities tradition.

I believe that learning should be a natural and enjoyable activity based upon compelling personal experience. Learning is a process which must be driven by student interest and need. It is not the result at the end of the road: it is the road itself.

In the jargon of educational theory I guess I am a constructivist. I believe that knowledge is constructed by human beings when information becomes meaningful. My job is to design special experiences that will give students the opportunity to create their own meanings and understandings of the information at hand. It is my job to facilitate the process of making knowledge personal and therefore meaningful.

For example, in my Art History Survey class I might have students memorize the characteristics of temples and sacred places. There is nothing wrong with that, but I also have them personalize that information. The Church Chat Project requires them to set up an interview with a member of the clergy to discuss the way that the architectural set-up of the church (temple, mosque or synagogue) reflects beliefs concerning the proper way to worship. The interview is a personal encounter in an actual place. I encourage students to interview a clergy person from their home church (if they have one) to personalize the information even more. Students are then required to process the result of the interview and present it orally to the class. It is only after the exercise of trying to clearly say or write what we know that we begin to own that information and make it meaningful. The academic cliché, "I never really understood my discipline until I had to teach it," is relevant here.

The ability to construct meaning is essentially a social skill, not too different from conversation. Conversation is also essential to the development of that skill. Student centered discussion and collaborative learning projects are excellent places for meaning to be created. Collaborative learning experiences hasten the transformation of esoteric information into personally relevant knowledge. A good example of such a transformative event would be the Artist Follies Project. Small groups of Art History students choose a masterwork then bring it to life. They are required to research the milieu and history of the painting and then write and perform a short skit which makes the content of the painting understandable to a contemporary audience. The event itself is open to the campus and has become a social event. Without fail students will remember that painting for the rest of their lives and hopefully all paintings will resonate with that meaningfulness. I try to include appropriate collaborative experiences such as this into all my classes.

In order to create potentially meaning-making experiences I must pay attention to the art and performance of teaching. I used to play the Renaissance Hurdy-Gurdy in a Celtic caile band. Whenever I discuss Bosch's painting The Garden of Earthly Delights in my Art History classes, I play the Hurdy-Gurdy to illustrate the implied soundtrack of the instruments illustrated in the painting. I then tell them my performance sounds like hell, literally.

Through the liberal use of storytelling, musical performance, film imagery and student centered discussion of popular culture I encourage students to realize that they use critical and analytical skills every day without being aware of it. For example, when I demonstrate the similarities between the stereotypes found in the old Star Trek television series and the stereotypes found in Classical Greek pedimental sculpture, both subjects are illuminated and the seemingly arcane becomes accessible. By examining the known cultural artifact, they come to accept and appreciate the unknown. A visit to the local mall, for example, to critique gift shop

bric-a-brac can effectively integrate the genres of middle class taste found in the Dutch Renaissance with an understanding of contemporary design and marketing issues.

We have special experiences of meaning most often in community. A class that functions as a community is a class where learning and growth is taking place. At the beginning of each semester I take time to challenge my classes as communities. It may be a simple collaborative performance art piece such as “Fire and Ice” where students are invited to sit in a circle and pick a piece of ice from a bowl in the center. They hold hands as a community, in each hand a piece of ice, until all the ice is melted. Afterwards, still in the circle, we discuss issues of sharing pain, of personal space, of social ecology, and perhaps most importantly, of how the experience makes us feel about each other. I have repeatedly seen this event become meaningful as a source of community identity.

I believe that the curriculum that best creates opportunities for creating meaning is interdisciplinary and theme-based. Walls between subjects are a convenient fiction. Art history and political history cannot be separated any more than science and religion. The prime goal of every classroom experience should be to enable students to weave seemingly disparate information into a semi-coherent fabric. A personal and creatively designed fabric, to be sure, but nevertheless one that is a personal meaningful whole.

As I have said, to the Crow to “make a way” is to live out a vision. It can be a protocol or sacred way of doing something but it always implies a disciplined way of making an event or journey special. I hope, as Bill Bigday’s vision implied, to “make a way” for students to journey to unexamined places.

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