

Daily Meditation 09-08-24

My and My Brother's Story in Education

Good morning.

So we're going to continue a conversation, a meditation about my brother's new book *on becoming educated* — spelled differently, E, D, G, E — subtitle,: *how uncertainty can link the frontiers of expert inquiry to the education of all*.

One of the points he likes to make, is that the young can pose new questions for adults in education, as in all the sciences — and that the young therefore take thinkers, including educators, to the edge, if we listen to their questions, to their new questions, and don't just deliver a package that is complete and finished and serve itself.

And of course, I talk about this as the Via Negativa, respecting what we do not know, and uncertainty, to honor that in our educational systems. And this inspires teachers to go further and to be creative.

Now in today's meditation, I'm really setting a context of contextualizing my brother's work, by beginning with my work in education, because the Daily Meditations are in my name. And one thing my brother never pretended to be was a theologian. But we'll see, especially in tomorrow's and Tuesday's meditation, which I'm very excited about, how brilliantly he brings together science and spirituality in our time. And that was a big influence on me, from my brother.

For example, here's a book called *The Tao of Science* by R.G.H. Siu, published by the Cambridge Massachusetts, by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1957. My brother gave me this book in 1957. I was a junior in high school. And that just shows a couple of things. First of all, I've kept it all these years, which is amazing, I've lost a lot of books over the years. Lots of other things too.

But he was already intuiting my interest in religion and spirituality. And he was not living at home then; he was off in college. But he sent this to me, and of course, I read it. And it's just an indicator of how his mind worked. He was treating culture as a whole, and he was as interested in religion as he was in science and in the arts. And of course, the center for him was education. So I just wanted to share that book with you, too.

Now, I allude in today's (Monday's) meditation, to my working with 10-year-olds, for two semesters. I want to tell you the story behind it. I was teaching at Holy Names College — no, no, I'm sorry, at Berra College, north of Chicago, one of the suburbs there. And I got a call from a parent who had heard about my teaching, and he said, “I hear you're a very creative teacher.” He said, “Several parents, whom I know, including myself, are not pleased with the religious education, the catechetics, that our children are getting at at the church. So we'd like to hire you to teach a religion class for our 10-year-old boys, and there'll be about seven of them.” So we talked, and I agreed to do it on Sunday mornings, in my basement.

And the first semester, what we did was we built catacombs in the basement. So we had two-by-fours, and wire, and paste, and paper to put over the catacombs, etc. So we built these, and then we sat inside these catacombs, these dark tunnels we'd built, and told stories. Stories about the early church, which was not a million-dollar building on the corner, that your father had a mortgage on, probably. But was hiding out in catacombs, because the Christians were being persecuted.

Well, I guess the kids really got into it, because at the end of the semester, this man called me again, and he said, “we can't believe how excited our children are, about religion class! They talk about it all week long! They can hardly wait for their next class! And we don't understand what you're doing, but keep doing it, because the kids are excited!”

Well, first of all, I think it's good to hear that kids and others can get excited about education, and indeed about religious education. But I tried to explain to them, well, the kids got it, but to the parents, the adults, that we're talking about history here. We're re-envisioning, reincarnating the original church, which was underground. It wasn't above ground, it wasn't popular to be a Christian back then.

And then, about 20 years later — these kids were 10, so it would have been 18 years later — I was lecturing in Chicago, and after my lecture, a young man came up and said, “do you remember me?” and I said “no.” He said “I was 10 years old in your class, 18 years ago. And one day, you passed around rocks and stones inside the catacombs, and had us talk about rocks. Well,” he said, “my whole life has been devoted to that. I climb mountains all over the world, seeking out special stones, and then I carve them. And I make a living on this.” And he gave me a beautiful rock, with Celtic crosses built on it. And then another one with the continents carved into it. He said, “I owe it all to you, because of that class. It was so creative.”

Then 10 minutes later, another young man came up to me, and the same thing: He had been in my class, and his life had also been directed by that experience of creativity in the classroom.

In the second semester, what we did together, was we made a movie. Back then, it was 8 mm movies, no iPhones — built around my poem and the music of the Musical Mystical Bear. So that was what we did for the 2nd class. But again you can see how I borrowing from my brother Tom's understanding that we learn through doing things, not just thinking or reading about them. And such learning has an impact.

And here I want to turn to my brother's impact. Because I wrote on Saturday's Daily Meditation about his creative way of reaching kids in the classroom. And then, I got some stories back. Here's a story from a student who was in his 6th-grade. And when he heard of Tom's death, he said,

Your sad news has reached me in the UK, having just flown back. O my goodness. He was a young 87 years old, indeed. I'm so grateful and thankful that we managed to have time together. I've been thinking about Tom Fox lately, having just shared various stories with a friend sometime in the last few months. This fellow, he's about 60 years old today. How this 6th-grade teacher set so many of us on a path, as critical thinkers, affecting so many lives. The various success stories, successful careers, fascinating stories within each of us, might be traced back to our beloved Mr. Fox's temperament, patience, and worldview. Walking to the duck pond, building imaginative things with chicken wire, gumdrops, plywood and string — let alone committing the name Aristophanes to memory for life.

To study Greek history, my brother had them create an Aristophanes play. They took Aristophanes' play and became actors in it.

Not to mention the singing of folk songs. Each time I hear "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," or "The House of the Rising Sun," I'm back to one of those spring days on the grass near the parking lot. We were all much too young and unformed to appreciate the power of his guidance back in 1966-67, yet it's so apparent these many years later.

So that was one person's memory of Tom's class, that has stuck with him all these years. And here's another person who became a doctor:

I constructed molecules with gumdrop atoms and toothpicks. I used balsa wood and string to construct a 3-D surface for a math lesson in topology. We were given homework to come up with

a proof of a multiplication equation. I wandered the school grounds writing poetry on our Think Days. This was collated by Tom into a book of everyone's writing, that I was able to locate many years later, for our 6th-grade reunion. I debated the nature of matter while staying in the character of Socrates, I had a lead role in our production of Aristophanes play "The Birds." A photo of the four of us wearing beaks made the Capital Times, which is the Madison newspaper. Tom invited any student who was interested to meet with him for day outings, to places of interest near Madison. I always showed up for those sparsely-attended adventures. It was on one of them that I accidentally called Mr. Fox my father! Later he did marry my mother. It was better than winning the lottery.

So these are a few testimonies. Here's another one: *These great stories emerge from years of teaching at O'Donough Elementary. When I was 10 to 12 years old, I made one of the sections of our Chartres cathedral rose window. I played out Civil War battles in our sandbox. I helped construct Clarence the skeleton, with organs and skin as well as bones.*

So these are a few testimonies. There is an element of ecstasy in remembering, that occurs in education, in the classroom, in learning. And I think my brother Tom was very devoted to that. And it obviously bore lots of fruit, lots of good results.

Thank you. We'll see you next week.