

GRACE AND PERSEVERANCE

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Lee Fink defines learning in terms of change. “For learning to occur,” he says, “there has to be some kind of change in the learner. No change, no learning.”¹

This is the classic definition of learning at least as far back as Plato. And it applies as well to protozoa as to pupils.

“Significant learning,” Fink adds, “requires that there be some kind of lasting change that is important in terms of the learner’s life.” I take it that “lasting change” is supposed to last beyond the final exam and that “important” means more important than passing the class. Beyond that I’m not certain what Mr. Fink means. It is worth noting that “significant learning” is not, per se, a good, by Fink’s definition. Rape or abuse or torture or death will doubtless effect “lasting change that is important in terms of the learner’s life.” We may charitably add to Mr. Fink’s definition “by adding value to that life,” or something of the sort. But that just adds another bank of fog that will resist penetration by Mr. Fink’s social-science.

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The phrase “creating significant learning experiences” assumes that experience is the primary path to significant learning and that we can craft experiences in the classroom that will result in significant learning. I suppose both assumptions are warranted, depending upon what we mean by “experience.”

But I’m not going to do analysis this morning.

Nor will I talk about particular strategies for creating significant learning experiences. I would, however, like to talk about two significant learning experiences I myself had as a student and then make a general observation.

ENCOUNTERING WALT WHITMAN AND ANTHONY KENNY

One evening in early June of 1985 I was slouched in a study carrel in the Harold B. Lee Library at BYU, slogging through the hyperbolically ecstatic and provocative verses of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. The sunset was splashing amber shadows over the quad outside as spring lovers lounged on the lawn. I don’t recall what passage I was reading, exactly, but quite suddenly, without presentiment, all of Whitman’s bombastic, bloated “I’s and “me’s became “I-thou’s and “thee’s. I was overwhelmed. For two, three, four hours I sat riveted to the pages. It was as though

Whitman had come out of the leaves, body and soul, and we occupied together that space between us.

Two years later, I sat in the room of my tutor Anthony Kenny, Master of Balliol College, Oxford, timorously stumbling through the last lines of an essay I had written the night before on Aristotle's analysis of practical wisdom. Mr. Kenny sat musing at the ceiling and tapping the arm of his chair. When I had finished, he smiled broadly. "I rather liked that," he said with his Irish brogue. I relaxed. Then came the onslaught: "Now what evidence do you have from the text to support your claim that...? And what do you mean by such-and-such? And have you read so-and-so on that question in your third paragraph? You really should, you know. And what are the implications of your claim that?" For an hour Mr. Kenny and I sparred over Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. He naturally got the better of me, though I parried a few blows. This was a significant learning experience. The tutorial was no different from any of the other tutorials I had enjoyed with Mr. Kenny, except that in this case the dialogue became a communion.

These are two of many significant learning experiences I have had. I came away from them changed for good, in every dimension of Fink's taxonomy. Some of the other experiences are too sacred to describe here, like the moment my mother breathed her last breath clinging to my hand, or those transcendent experiences when God has breathed upon me the eternal Thou and turned my whole being toward him. Most significant learning experiences are not moments but durations, such as the experience of conjugal love, with important changes happening imperceptibly, like continental drift.

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A GIFT OF GRACE OR PERSEVERANCE

When I think back over my 350-some-odd credits of college education, very few classroom experiences stand out that effected a lasting and important change in my life. That doesn't mean that I didn't have great teachers—I did. Nor does it mean that no significant learning took place. I just don't recall any teacher designing a classroom activity or paper assignment or service-learning experience that in itself effected the kind of change that Mr. Fink is talking about. Those kinds of activities and experiences are important; we could not be effective teachers without carefully designing learning experiences. But I submit that significant learning is more often either a gift of grace, like my experiences with Walt Whitman and Anthony Kenny, or a gift of perseverance, like wisdom or conjugal love, through an experience of years.

That doesn't mean that the teacher cannot invite or nurture significant learning experiences. But it may not be by designing engaging classroom activities or stimulating assignments. In my experience, at least, significant

learning has more to do with a kind of relationship between the teacher and pupil or between the pupil and a text than it does with the mechanics of teaching.

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I-THOU

I have described this relationship, in connection with my own significant learning experiences, in terms of Martin Buber's I-Thou.² This, I think, is the key. I'm short on time, so I'll only be able to hint at what I'm thinking. Most of our day-to-day interactions with our students and peers happen in the world of It. We encounter each other as objects of perception, sensation, feeling, desire, and so forth. We entrench this I-It posture toward our students, by the way, when we think of them as customers and live by the metaphors of marketing, management, and customer satisfaction. In the kingdom of Its, capitalism is king. Structurally, the students experience the university pretty much as they experience Wal-Mart, with images of grinning satisfied customers pasted on posters above the aisles. The marketers draw near with their lips, but their hearts are far from Thee. Most of our encounters are like that. We encounter each other in parts, an eye, a tongue, a brain, a body, a pocket book, but not a being.

On the other hand, when, as Buber says, we "utter the primary word I-Thou," the Thou is not an object for us; the I-Thou is a relation occupying the space between you and me. We engage each other with our whole being. We are in genuine dialogue, as I was with Sir Anthony. And the Thou need not even be present, but may merely speak through a text, like Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, or through a painting or a symphony.

I suggest that being willing to utter the primary word I-Thou is the essence of the most profoundly significant learning experiences—the stuff that language and letters and arts are made of. And I think that the willingness to utter the primary word I-Thou is precisely what the Lord means by love or charity, as when he enjoins the teacher in the school of the prophets to greet his students:

Art thou a brother or brethren? I salute you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, in token or remembrance of the everlasting covenant, in which covenant I receive you to fellowship, in a determination that is fixed, immovable, and unchangeable, to be your friend and brother through the grace of God in the bonds of love, to walk in all the commandments of God blameless, in thanksgiving, forever and ever. (Doctrine and Covenants 88:133)

I suggest that the truly significant learning experiences will only come to our students, whether by grace or through perseverance, if we teach them through our own example to utter the primary word I-Thou. They will learn to engage other people and texts, and even nature, in

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genuine dialogue, venturing into the space between the I and the Thou. The I that utters I-Thou, Buber tells us, is different from the I that utters I-It. The I steps out of itself toward the Thou and is thus transformed. Perhaps Zion is precisely the place where every I becomes a Thou, and every I, an I-Thou. ∞

NOTES

1. <http://www.ou.edu/idp/significant/WHAT%20IS.pdf>. Accessed 29 August 2006.
2. Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (1936), transl. Walter Kaufman, *I and Thou* (1970).