

Performing Ourselves Differently

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Part 4

I have come to believe, that a carrion culture of domination, disempowerment, disadvantage, disenfranchisement, and death in education, more generally manifested in social deprivations, can only be dynamically transformed by performing itself *differently*; and in so doing, transform itself, its context, and its knowledge about the relations between itself and its context, and through this performance come to know *itself better* and know *its better selves*. Following Amartya Sen's provocative and important work in rethinking economics, *Development as Freedom*, I have begun, drawing on Lithuanian born, French intellectual Emmanuel Levinas and his commentators, to think: *What if we take Holiness as an end for education? What might it mean to perform Holiness as an educator?*

Levinas distinguishes between the sacred and the idea of Holiness. The sacred refers to religious experiences that encourage a loss of one's sense of self and capacity for rational engagement. It represents the desire to merge with, to become one with or take on the characteristics of what is believed to be the divine realm or the attributes associated with the supernatural such as power or omniscience. Holiness for Levinas, however, means ethical separation, as before the Holy, one comes into an experience of "presence," an aesthetic experience like one has with great Art, or in nature, where, upon hesitation and lingering, one is welcomed and becomes increasingly aware (learns) of oneself as separate—a unique and distinct being with unique responsibilities. The recognition of this distance, the absolute and irreducible difference of the other to whom we are responsible, invites us to welcome and venerate the Other's difference without seeking a reduction to the sterile singularity of sameness. It is this that marks the encounter with difference as Holy.

To be morally whole for Levinas is "to accept the authority...of the gaze that questions our self-absorption and that makes us aware of our capacity to be cruel. Only this gaze can cut through the hardened shell of the ego." Indeed, for Levinas the true sign of integrity "...is the ability to affirm one's bad conscience, or...to refuse to make compromises with the moral indifference of existence" or, as one commentator observes, "the true divide [or] fundamental split for Levinas is not between believer and non-believer, but rather between those who "are shaken by their own potential for brutality and those who are oblivious to it." These words in particular have deep resonance with me as I try to perform myself differently and continually have to confront my own immense "capacity for brutality," which comes from being part of systems of power and privilege that at times appear to be "faceless" or attempt erasures and silencings of identities; that allow a slippage, dilution, or evasion of personal responsibility. As a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, I am compelled to reflect on the seeming inability/incapacity of many citizens, including children, to be shaken by their escalating capacity for brutality in every sphere of life, both public and private. And while it is becoming more and more difficult to avoid the consequences of our past brutalities, I fear that we are close to a tipping point in which we may *choose not to* acknowledge the

existence, far less the authority, "...of the gaze that questions our self-absorption and that makes us aware of our capacity to be cruel."

I am only just beginning to articulate responses to questions such as, "What *might* our roles as teachers be *if* we accept Holiness as a worthy end for education?" How might education be more welcoming to difference and help us to better recognise our capacity for brutality? What if our educational and developmental agendas were oriented by this deeper concern with *Holiness*, a concern with welcoming difference joyfully rather than merely tolerating it begrudgingly? A first insight comes from the abandoning of the unproductive language of deficiency discourses and moral panics surrounding students, teachers, and curriculum. An overwhelming abundance of possibilities emerge, a reflection of the ceaseless creativity in the universe, which at present I best describe as *Grace*.

Etymologically, the roots of the word education speak to a process of "drawing out," a phenomenon that too often is reversed in attempts to "put in." At this end of education is a new beginning. As we attempt to perform ourselves differently, to educate *for* Holiness, perhaps there is also a need for a subtle shift in language that mirrors the movement to a more holistic practice of *evocation*, that is, of *calling forth* that which is best from our students and ourselves. Be Holy!

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