

Reform from the center

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CHAPTER XII

Reform from the Center

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The contributions to this volume attack the problem of providing quality mass education from all sides.

From Cunningham's review in chapter 1 of previous yearbooks of the National Society for the Study of Education, through Mitchell's sardonic reflections on educators' fixation with the prefix "re" in chapter 3, to Murphy's listing of thirty-two reform reports issued during the 1980s in chapter 11, the foregoing chapters repeatedly document the ongoing and intensifying—but at the same time faltering and despairing—attempts to provide quality mass education in the United States.

Educational reform attempts to attack the problem from all sides, but the situation continues to grow worse.

One reason for the current state of affairs is that, contrary to our continuing lullaby to ourselves, we are no longer a young nation. In fact, not only is our population aging, but, as a system of government, the United States is virtually the oldest on the planet. Old age inevitably brings decay and often brings decadence as well.

The only specific that wards off decadence is a moral, religious, and educational vision that locates each participant—whether person, family, faction, profession, or organization—as serving, and as responsible to, some higher calling than one's own comfort, pleasure, or self-interest. Democratic capitalism is an ideology without any such vision of superordinate, common good.¹ It is an ideology that releases youthful vigor from constraint; it is an ideology that guards against spurious and totalitarian definitions of a "common" good; but it is also an ideology that, with increasing age, invites decadent self-absorption and a preoccupation with entitlement rather than service. Such is the cultural condition of the United States political economy today.

A second reason for the current state of affairs and the relative failure of educational reform stems directly from the first. The decadent approach to problem solving is to keep the process as removed from oneself as possible. The implicit reasoning is something

like "I am not part of the problem, but part of the solution. It's good of me to care at all, and this in itself indicates that my position is beyond reproach. It would certainly, therefore, be unjust to threaten my entitlements or to suggest any solution that creates any significant inconvenience for me and mine." Of course, to state such an attitude explicitly is to make it sound more suspicious than it does when felt implicitly. In any event, the eventual outcome of such an approach to problem solving is to attack the problem ineffectually from all sides, while all centers (all selves and social units felt from within) remain protected against significant reform. Thus, the educational problem continues to grow worse *precisely because* we are attacking it from all sides and not from the center.

Reform from the Center

Significant educational reform can only come from the center, from all centers.

Each social unit—person, family, faction, profession, or organization—with a stake in quality mass education must, first and foremost, study and reform its own actions. Each social unit within the educational process must become truly self-educating in its practice. To do so, each must generate within itself a community of inquiry that tests, in an ongoing, real-time fashion, the relationships among its vision, strategies, practices, and outcomes.² Discovering significant incongruities among these qualitatively different layers (and there *are* always such incongruities to be discovered, even in the most high-performing of organizations) will motivate experiments and reforms toward greater awareness, efficacy, and integrity. From time to time, such incongruities will suggest even more profound changes for the person or organization engaging in self-study: a developmental transformation whereby the fundamental assumptions under which the unit has been operating are revealed and overturned when necessary. A true community of inquiry within an ongoing community of social practice will be one that can accept such fundamental change within itself. This overall conception relates closely to Mitchell's proposals at the end of chapter 2.

Once such a process of reform from the center is well underway, that social unit becomes capable of creating liberating structures within its sphere of action and authority. Liberating structures are organizational systems (whether within a particular classroom, a particular school, or a particular profession) that simultaneously

motivate high performance and develop a capacity for reform from the center on the part of participants.³ Obviously, such structures must be profoundly complex and ironic, and hence supremely challenging to create and manage, for it would be contradictory to speak of a "structure" that forces "self-reform."

There will always be many pressures directed against reform from the center, never more so than in a decadent society where the dominant ideology subtly obscures the possibility of such self-reform. Although these pressures must be recognized and responded to, they do not constitute a rational argument against the process of self-reform, for self-reform is the process for generating increasingly efficacious and responsible initiatives. At the outset of self-reform, the social unit typically feels overwhelmed by divergent pressures and virtually incapable of sustained, focused initiative. The process of self-reform generates the capacity to withstand and overcome the very pressures that incapacitate otherwise comparable social units.

This perspective on reform helps to organize many of the otherwise puzzling findings within educational research, as well as many of the proposals advanced in the earlier chapters of this book. As Thomas Hoffer and James Coleman show in many ways in chapter 6, individual schools and subgroups within schools can influence students' behaviors independently of aggregate community effects and even of the students' own individual predispositions. In other words, positive educational quality can be generated at all points (all centers) in the system, irrespective of external conditions and pressures.

This recognition relates directly to the many proposals for increasing the empowerment of individual teachers, principals, and school buildings, proposals reiterated throughout this volume and especially in chapters 8, 9, and 10. The dilemma is how to accomplish such empowerment while simultaneously raising standards. Only an individual and institutional process of self-reform in the midst of ongoing practice can simultaneously accomplish these dual objectives.

Obviously, this process of self-reform must somehow be difficult at both the personal and organizational levels, or else its practice would be widespread and recognizable. Why and how it is difficult will also seem immediately obvious to many readers from the very term "self-reform." Self-reform implies a continuing vulnerability to inquiry, criticism, and the turbulence of transformation. To most persons, such vulnerability connotes, in turn, discomfort, disequilibrium, and pain. Hence, it is natural for persons and organizations to shy away from reform from the center.

According to Piaget's and Kegan's developmental theory,⁴ however, it is also natural (but a long, slow, and uncertain process) for persons to reform themselves from the center, dethroning their reigning assumptions at any given stage of development and relegating these to explicit and manageable variables within a wider system of assumptions at the next stage. Why, then, does the tendency to shy away from reform from the center seem to supercede the attractiveness of such reform?

Why We Shy Away from Reform from the Center

The first reason why adults and educational institutions shy away from reform from the center, or self-reform, is that virtually no leaders or organizations support such a strategy. Piaget's stages of development refer to childhood development. At each childhood developmental transformation there are adults and contexts supportive of the qualitatively new kind of meaning the child begins to make of self and world. By contrast, we are here speaking of development within those very adults and those very contexts toward stages beyond Piaget's final "formal operations" stage.⁵ Although these later stages are inherently self-reforming once they are reached, transformation *toward* these stages is a delicate process that requires help over extended periods from mentors and organizational systems already at these stages. Yet research finds very few adults (e.g., teachers, administrators) or organizational contexts operating beyond the "formal operations" stage.⁶ School personnel and schools that edge toward such self-reform find virtually no models or support for the qualitatively new kind of meaning they begin to make.

This new kind of meaning is characterized by strong paradox, that is, by opposites that require one another rather than mutually excluding one another. For example, late stage educational leaders (e.g., Gandhi, Pope John XXIII, Lech Walesa) exhibit passionately held theories *and* the artistic practice of inquiry, with strong theory and strong practice mutually reforming one another through their interaction.⁷

A second reason why people are more likely to shy away from than embrace self-reform is that the general culture of discourse does not point toward the existence of strong paradox. This reason interacts with the first reason in a chicken and egg fashion. Because there are few adults and institutions at postformal stages, postformal discourse characterized by strong paradox is rare. And, vice versa,

because of the rarity of postformal discourse, operational concepts that are fundamental to organizing and educating become reified in ways that obstruct adult and organizational development beyond formal operations.

For example, the terms "power" and "freedom" have lost virtually all vestiges of their original postformal, paradoxical meaning and are usually viewed today as mutually exclusive opposites. "Power" has come to mean unilateral, unidirectional causation of change in another,⁸ reducing the other's freedom. Mitchell has explored closely in chapter 2 how this impoverished notion of power creates a caricature of educational authority in many of our schools. In a parallel but opposite loss of meaning, "freedom" has come to mean merely freedom from constraint (freedom from external powers that unilaterally control one's behavior).

Power, today, rarely refers to the mutual, dialectical self-reforming causation inherent in the educational power of Plato's dialogues, of Nietzsche's self-overcoming will to power, of liberating structures, and of the process of development itself. (Piaget and Kegan both show how developmental causation is interactional, not unilateral.) Freedom, today, rarely refers to the positive, postformal developmental freedom to act with "virtuosity," that is, virtuously, excellently, and effectively all at once (Plato's concept of *arete*,⁹ Nietzsche's notion of "Caesar with the soul of Christ"¹⁰).

Any truly educational organization that supports development will in fact intertwine power and freedom in a form that I have named "liberating structure." (See above and footnote 3.) But such structures, which are simultaneously capable of reforming themselves and of engaging their participants in self-reform, become impossible to imagine—let alone implement—so long as "power" and "freedom" are assumed to be opposites.

There is yet a third reason why the tendency to shy away from reform from the center seems to supercede its attractiveness. This reason concerns the scholarly climate today surrounding the conduct of social science in general and of educational research in particular. Reform from the center, or self-reform, requires an integration of ongoing action and ongoing inquiry amidst real-time organizational pressures. The scientific issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability must be faced amidst such pressures, not apart from them. Such an integration of action and inquiry—whether it be called "action inquiry," "collaborative inquiry," "action science," or "reflective practice"¹¹—represents a fundamentally different approach to social

science than either the quantitative, empirical approach or the qualitative, phenomenological approach. Like the ironic, dialectical process characteristic of "liberating structures," the dialectic of "action inquiry" is virtually impossible to imagine, let alone implement, within the world of research and scholarship today. Yet educational research and colleges of education will remain fundamentally uneducational—not supporting adult and organizational self-reform and development and not responding to James Guthrie's criticisms at the end of chapter 10—unless they explore the paradoxical demand of action inquiry.

In other words, we tend to shy away from reform from the center, not because of a lack of external resources or a surfeit of external pressures, but because of a lack of leaders, institutions, and methods that model, support, and generate reform from the center. Reform from the center during the 1990s is a developmental challenge, not just for particular persons and organizations, but for our society as a whole. Cunningham's chapter on reconstituting local government suggests one way to approach reform from the center.

John Dewey's Practice as an Incomplete Illustration of Self-Reform

A backward glance at John Dewey's practice can provide us with a slightly more concrete illustration of what reform from the center means; of how difficult reform from the center is to recreate by imitation; of how easily someone dedicated to self-reform passes beyond the understanding of others; and of how easily that person's process of self-reform can cease, even when he is as explicitly and intelligently dedicated to such a process as was John Dewey.

We all know—at varying degrees of distance—that John Dewey is quite probably the foremost philosopher produced by this continent. We call his philosophy "pragmatism," know that it had something to do with learning the truth by active experimentation, and that it led to an educational reform movement called "progressive education."

Fewer know that Dewey himself directed a school that embodied this mode of education—the laboratory school at the University of Chicago. Even fewer know that the practice of this school was not to implement any particular ideology, such as what later came to be known as "progressive education," but rather to observe constantly and discuss the practice of the individual teachers and the community as a whole.¹²

In short, what was so dynamic, provocative, and powerful about

Dewey's practice was that it constituted an institutionalized and individualized process of self-reform. Precisely this element of his practice was lost, however, when it was translated first (by Dewey) into a fully explicit, didactic philosophy and then (by readers) into an ideology. Gradually, a caricature of the original practice spread widely: in place of the positively empowering process of active experimentation, many progressive schools and teachers offered students a negative freedom from constraint that came to be called "permissiveness."

In the meantime—and this is even less known—Dewey in his late fifties, while at Columbia's Teachers College, for a time worried that his formal philosophy, for all that it rhetorically espoused the importance of practice, was in fact so distant from a description of self-reforming practice that it lent itself to misinterpretation. Why was his theory so shaded a window to his practice? Why had he himself put more store by his philosophizing than by his practicing, when his practice was in fact perhaps closer to his essential genius? How might this incongruity be rectified?

Prompted by questions like these, Dewey began working with a man named Alexander who helped persons experience the relationship between their bodies and their heads through various breathing, posture, and eye-hand coordination exercises. Dewey found these exercises "the most humiliating experience of my life, intellectually speaking. For to find that one is unable to execute directions . . . in doing such a seemingly simple act as to sit down, when one is using all the mental capacity which one prides oneself upon possessing, is not an experience congenial to one's vanity."¹³ Dewey was discovering that, despite his devotion to reflecting about practice (not to mention reflecting about reflecting about practice), there was at each moment a yawning gap of which he had heretofore been unaware between his mind and his body.

Dewey gradually came to feel how his head, too, was embodied—how thought occurs within the context, always, of one's daily practice, how true thought is not general, context-free philosophy or science, but rather poetry, thought reformed from the center by an awareness of its relation to one's current breath, passion, and action. Dewey produced considerable poetry in the years following the beginning of his work with Alexander, especially during a passionate, secret (and perhaps not physically consummated) love affair with the Polish immigrant novelist Anzia Yezierska.¹⁴

That these events at least verged on the transformational for him is

repeatedly suggested by the critical significance and passion with which his own references imbued them. Prior to meeting Alexander and Yeziarska, Dewey had intellectually hated any philosophical dualism between thought and action, but had recognized in himself the predominance of intellectuality ("a onesidedness I regret but am too old to rectify"¹⁵) as well as a certain affectlessness. Of Alexander's subsequent influence, Dewey would write, "My theories of mind-body, of the coordination of the self and of the place of ideas in inhibition and control of overt action required contact with the work of F. M. Alexander . . . to transform them into realities."¹⁶ Of Yeziarska's influence, he would write, poetically, "I am overcome as by thunder/ Of my blood that surges/ From my cold heart to my clear head" and "Had not rich fall¹⁷ her ripe fruit brought/ As proof of time's fulfilled good/ Life's inner speech I had not caught."¹⁸

But if, through his relationship to Yeziarska, Dewey caught something of "life's inner speech," the awareness of how passion interrelates thought and action, he may soon have let go his tenuous grip. At least, he soon ended his relationship with her. In her *Love in the Promised Land*, Mary Dearborn calls this development "tragic emotional cowardice" on Dewey's part.¹⁹ The circumstances are fascinating. Dewey hired the Polish immigrant Yeziarska to participate in a study of Polish immigrants in Philadelphia, along with a number of his leading doctoral students. But he increasingly distanced himself from her as she became increasingly critical of the parallel distance that the study's scientific methods created between the researchers and the immigrants. In the end, Dewey reclaimed the correspondence between the two of them, threw his poems in the trash (whence they were recovered and eventually published twenty-five years after his death), and took a trip to the Orient that lasted several years. Instead of discovering a new type of engaged social research, as would later be named "collaborative inquiry" or "action science," Dewey took the conventional academic route toward objectivity—greater distance.

As difficult as such things are to judge at a distance, it appears that Dewey stopped short of a developmental transformation from the "Strategist" stage (a stage that few enough adults reach, where one seeks intellectually to bridge the gap between theory and practice) to the "Magician" stage (an extremely rare position, reached perhaps by Gandhi and Pope John XXIII, where one maintains an ongoing experiential alertness to the interplay of thought, passion, and practice in oneself and others).²⁰

However, even Dewey's early efforts to integrate his theory and practice more profoundly through an ever self-awakening and self-reforming awareness were unpalatable to his peers, students, and emulators. They viewed his interest in the Alexander techniques as a peculiar eccentricity rather than as a "progressive" development on his part and as a potential aim for themselves. Most did not know about his relationship with Yeziarska at all.

So, Dewey—one of the most practical philosophers since Socrates walked the streets of Athens and certainly the philosopher with the greatest impact on the American educational scene—was emulated widely in theory, but hardly at all in his practice of reform from the center at the University of Chicago laboratory school. Later, he himself would verge upon, but not complete, a further developmental transformation—a further reform from the center. This reform was so far removed from most people's conventional views of the practical that this time he was not emulated at all, despite his prior widespread influence and his continuing conviction that the entire corpus of his work pointed toward the experiential integration of mind and body. He himself discontinued his developmental transformation when its direction contradicted the norms of mainline social scientific method.

Conclusion

This version of the story of John Dewey suggests how seminal the challenge of reform from the center is.

First, individuals seeking to lead reform from the center must cultivate a self-study and self-reform process that generates an active awareness of their own intuitions, theories, ongoing actions, and effects on the environment and of the gaps among them. As we have seen, Dewey in his later life recognized his own incompleteness in this regard and began to explore, but evidently stopped short in the pursuit of, an experiential awareness that can listen to "life's inner speech."

Second, schools and other institutions that seek to model reform from the center in their operations must cultivate an analogous self-study or self-reform process, like the process at Dewey's University of Chicago laboratory school. But this process has proven difficult, if not impossible, to imitate. In a sense, it must be rediscovered through an experimental process in each institutional setting, yet few of us are oriented to value and to endure the struggles involved in such ongoing experimentation.

Finally, at the center of reform from the center, communities of inquiry based on a profoundly different model of social science than is current today must develop. I leave it to readers of this piece to judge how likely it is that such communities of inquiry will develop within our current university structures!

A major dilemma emerges. On the one hand, this essay and this volume as a whole suggests that only a process that can be named reform from the center will respond to the challenges to education and human development in the United States during the 1990s. On the other hand, all the evidence and reason we can adduce suggests that widespread reform from the center is highly improbable. The existence of such a sharp incongruity can be interpreted either as a sign that this counsel ought to be dismissed as impractical, or as a deflating counsel of despair, or as an invitation to transformational self-study with others. This chapter and other chapters in this volume have highlighted the invitation to self-study. This chapter has emphasized, further, that true educational leadership revels in paradox, rising to its challenge.

Reform from the center *is* an improbable future. But reform from the center *creates* improbable futures.

FOOTNOTES

1. Among the many authors to offer a similar argument are Robert Heilbronner, *The Making of Economic Society* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), and Richard Pascale and Anthony Athos, *The Art of Japanese Management* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), and Lester Thurow, *The Zero Sum Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

2. This notion of self-study in practice is presented in William Torbert, "The Role of Self-Study in Improving Managerial and Institutional Effectiveness," *Human Systems Management* 2 (1981): 72-82, and idem, "Interpersonal Competence," in *The Modern American College*, ed. Arthur Chickering (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981). The notion of creating communities of inquiry within communities of social practice, as an aim not just for educational organizations, but for all organizations and for social science as well, is presented in Chris Argyris, Robert Putnam, and Diana Smith, *Action Science* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985). The openness to change at the center, characteristic of such communities, is illustrated by analogy in the Roman Emperor Hadrian's architectural masterpiece, the Pantheon, with its curved dome culminating at the center in an opening to the heavens above.

3. William Torbert, "Educating toward Shared Purpose, Self-Direction, and Quality Work: The Theory and Practice of Liberating Structure," *Journal of Higher Education* 49, no. 2 (1978): 109-135.

4. In *The Evolving Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), Robert Kegan has reinterpreted and expanded Piagetian theory in the most provocative and pedagogically useful formulation of the dynamics of development yet produced.

5. These "postformal" stages begin to receive definition and description in Charles N. Alexander and Ellen J. Langer, eds., *Higher Stages of Human Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), in Ken Wilber, *The Atman Project: A Transpersonal View of Human Development* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1980), and in William R. Torbert, *Managing the Corporate Dream: Restructuring for Long-Term Success* (Homewood, IL: Dow Jones-Irwin, 1987). See also, Michael L. Commons, Francis A. Richards, Cheryl Armon, eds., *Beyond Formal Operations: Late Adolescent and Adult Cognitive Development* (New York: Praeger, 1984).

6. Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey, "Adult Leadership and Adult Development: A Constructivist View," in *Leadership: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Barbara Kellerman (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984) and William R. Torbert, "Leading Organizational Transformation," in *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, Vol. 3, ed. Richard Woodman and William Pasmore (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1989). The research presented in these studies suggests, very broadly, that no more than one in twenty adults and one in a hundred organizations evolve to a postformal stage.

7. For discussion of Gandhi, see Erik Erikson's *Gandhi's Truth* (New York: Norton, 1969). For discussion of Pope John XXIII, see Torbert, "Leading Organizational Transformation." For discussion of Walesa, see idem, "Executive Mind, Timely Action," *ReVision* 6, no. 1 (1983): 1-23.

8. In *Models of Man* (New York: Wiley, 1957), Nobel prize winner Herbert Simon illustrates this concept of power (and its close relationship to one kind of science) in the following definition: "For the assertion, 'A has power over B,' we can substitute the assertion 'A's behavior causes B's behavior.' If we can define the causal relationship, we can define . . . power. . . . [It is] a problem of giving operational meaning to the asymmetry of the relationship between independent and dependent variable" (p. 5). Here power and causality are both assumed to be, and defined as, unilateral and unidirectional.

9. For discussion of *arete* see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 115.

10. Friedrich Nietzsche, as quoted in Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1968), p. 69.

11. Early attempts to define and illustrate an approach to social science that integrates action and inquiry include Donald Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1983); Chris Argyris, *Inner Contradictions of Rigorous Research* (New York: Academic Press, 1980); Argyris, Putnam, and Smith, *Action Science*; William R. Torbert, "Why Educational Research Has Been So Uneducational: The Case for a New Model of Social Science Based on Collaborative Inquiry," and "Collaborative Metropolitan Desegregation," in *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research*, ed. Peter Reason and John Rowan (Chichester, England: Wiley, 1981); idem, "Executive Mind, Timely Action"; idem, *Learning from Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972); idem, *Creating a Community of Inquiry* (Chichester, England: Wiley, 1976); idem, *Managing the Corporate Dream*.

12. See the description of Dewey's school in Seymour Sarason, *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1971).

13. From Dewey's "Introductory Word" in F. Mathias Alexander's *Man's Supreme Inheritance: Conscious Guidance and Control in Relation to Human Evolution in Civilization* (New York: Dutton, 1918), p. xvii.

14. As recently documented in Mary Dearborn's *Love in the Promised Land* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

15. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

16. Ibid., p. 97. Quoted from Jane Dewey, "Biography of John Dewey," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, Vol. 1, ed. Paul Schilp (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1939), p. 35.

17. A reference to Yezierska, whose birthday was in the autumn.

18. From Jo Ann Boydston, ed., *The Poems of John Dewey* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), as quoted in Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, pp. 110-111. The lines are from the poems entitled "Two Weeks" and "Autumn."

19. Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land*, p. 119.

20. For further discussion of these late and rare adult developmental positions and of how Gandhi's and Pope John XXIII's practices reflect them, see Torbert, *Managing the Corporate Dream*, and idem, "Leading Organizational Transformation."