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Education as an Introduction to Reality

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Today we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the founding of a house that would not even exist if everything were right with the world. Behind this beautiful celebration lies death, sickness, guilt, all manner of confusion, complication and weakness. The house is called a “children’s home” [*Kinderhaus*]. But if all things worked the way they were supposed to, there would not be a children’s home, anymore than there would be a home for the elderly. Children and the elderly need to be part of all of our lives, if life is not to become unbearably impoverished. And they in turn need adults who are “fully engaged in life” if they are to avoid becoming marginalized themselves.

Those who run this house and work in it are called educators.¹ But they “earn their bread” taking care of children. None of this is “normal.” Normally, raising children is not something one does professionally. One can give instruction professionally or one can be a teacher by profession, which means one communicates quite specialized knowledge and skills. But what sorts of knowledge and skills does an educator convey? Rousseau has the educator in his famous *Émile* say, “*Vivre c’est le métier que je veux lui apprendre*” (the career that I want to teach

him is how to live). But how does one teach others how to live? Only by living among others and doing all sorts of things with them. Education is not a process we undertake in order to achieve a set goal. There is no special activity that we can identify as “educating.” Education is rather a side effect, which comes about while someone is doing all kinds of other things.

Now, it is true that every interaction we have with children has a profound indirect influence on them. But we speak of “education,” on the other hand, only when we deliberately intend this influence, when we take responsibility for it and when, in certain circumstances, we do particular things in our interaction with children or keep ourselves from doing particular things for the sole reason that we intend our doing or not doing a particular thing to leave its stamp. And when in normal relations with children this sort of responsibility is neglected to an extreme degree, then homes like this one become necessary. Here that which would otherwise have been neglected is compensated for and to an otherwise unusual extent is forced to become an object of responsible planning. The consequence is that, now, even so-called normal parents often learn here how they can do a better job. The sense of responsibility that goes along with thinking about and asking over and over again what precisely this child needs now or what would be good for him leads of course to a competence that many parents could only dream about.

But that is not all there is to it. Why do we feel so happy when we enter this house, and particularly this house? That we feel so much at home here? That we leave this house strengthened and encouraged, as if we were returning to the desert from an oasis? The reason seems to me the very one that causes many of the colleagues of those who work here in the field of education to shake their heads. It is quite obvious that this house is not simply a reflection of everyday reality, anymore incidentally than an oasis is a reflection of the reality of the desert. For this reason it does not prepare the children enough for reality—or so more than a few people think. Education, they say, is meant to introduce one to reality.

No one would have any hesitation about agreeing with this statement, which incidentally comes from Sigmund Freud. But what in fact does it mean to educate for reality? What sort of goal is intended by this? One often hears talk of “educational goals” in pedagogical discussions. But most of these discussions are nevertheless misleading. It becomes clear how misleading they are above all the moment we ask, in the course of the discussion, precisely what sort of human type is ultimately meant to be produced as a result of the educational process. Previous centuries were familiar with such educational ideals, the ideal of the knight, the ideal of the gentleman, a particular ideal of the housewife, which was always determined to some extent by the class in question. These ideals were the common, standard images of a particular group of human beings, which were passed down through education from generation to generation. The education process was a process of growing up into a limited, but a common, world, the development of characteristic interests, knowledge, and skills that were specific to this world, the training of particular modes of behavior. The classes were different, to be sure—aristocrats and manual laborers had to look different; but there was general agreement about what each of them had to look like.

The person who grows up in a democratic and pluralistic society finds himself in an altogether different situation. In this situation, all people are meant to be educated in view of the same goal. But there is in fact no general consensus about what in fact the goal ought to be, what a human being is meant to be, and how he ought to live. In this case, the young person does not grow into a closed world, with generally recognized standards of right and wrong. And he is not predetermined, a priori, to belong to a particular group in this society, to carry out particular tasks, from which we are able “functionally,” as it were, to infer more or less what a person is meant to look like and what sorts of things he ought to be capable of doing in order to be adequate to these tasks. To be sure, even in our society there is a certain minimal standard of common values. Without this minimal standard, the existence of a free society would not in fact be possible. But it is nevertheless an illusion to think that this minimum, which is for example laid down in our country’s constitution, is able to serve as the foundation for an education worthy of the name, an education that aims to enable people to become human beings [*die Menschwerdung des Menschen*]. The opposite is in fact the case: the minimal consensus that comes to expression in our constitution and that holds together our society is sustained by more profound sources and that need to flow more fully, sources that therefore cannot conversely be sustained by this minimal consensus. If—to stay with this image—our groundwater had to replenish itself only from the water that runs from the public pipes, there would soon be nothing coming from our faucets.

Since we cannot steal it, where can we draw the water from? The talk about educational goals has the dilemma of giving us the impression that we could invent such goals, as if it were a matter of an option to be chosen, a deliberate reflection, a matter of taking pedagogical responsibility for the particular values on which we want to base our children’s education. But this is just what it is not. We do not choose values for the end of education. We are unable to invent educational goals for our children precisely because education is a side effect of human interaction with children, of our living with them. We can only allow children to participate in what fulfills us ourselves, what is truly real to us. Here the proverb holds true: “A scoundrel is a person who gives more than he has.” Children cannot be deceived in the long run by checks that cannot be cashed. This is why the self-formation of the educator is so important. One cannot in the end be “trained” to be an educator, one must already *be* someone oneself, one must have already become someone. One must be able to live in order to be able to teach how to live. One must have interests oneself in order to be able to awaken interests in others.

The way we learn a language is a paradigm of education. One’s native language is not taught by way of an organized curriculum of instruction. Moreover, the language that we teach our children is not something we invent ourselves; rather, it is the language that we ourselves use. A native language [*die Muttersprache*, one’s mother tongue] is the language one’s mother speaks [*die Sprache der Mutter*]. The child learns to speak the language insofar as his mother and the other people who interact with him bring the child into their language community and talk with them. Language is not in the first place an instrument by which we engage with the world and communicate. Instead, the world is first given to us only in linguistic interpretation. To teach someone to speak and to open up reality to him is one and the same thing. According to Christian belief, what stands at the beginning and the end of all reality is the *Logos*, the Word.

But whether or not a person shares this belief, its implication is apparent to anyone the moment he reflects on the matter: the world is given to us only in its linguistic interpretation. Teaching a language is the model for all other education. To educate means to introduce a person into one's own world, to interpret the world, to train a person to make distinctions, whether it be the distinction between a blackbird and a robin, between a brook and a canal, and between a Mercedes and a Volkswagen, or on the other hand the distinction between the important and the trivial, between the beautiful and the ugly, and between good and evil.

The distinctions just mentioned are not ones we can learn in a merely theoretical way. We learn to distinguish between the important and the trivial only through the practice of acts of preference, deferral, and renunciation. We learn to distinguish between "beautiful" and "ugly" by growing out of the crude judgments that "I like that" and "I don't like that," and by fashioning in ourselves an organ for the perception of objective qualities. But this happens in the first place through an encounter with beauty, through involvement with the beautiful, and through learning to do whatever one does in a beautiful manner. The distinction between good and evil, however, is something we acquire only by learning to take one side and to be against the other—and perhaps in certain circumstances even to be against ourselves; we acquire it by learning that the world is a battlefield between good and evil and that this battle goes on even in our own heart.

Today, many difficult obstacles stand in the way of growing up into a common world, and therefore in the way of education. To be sure, we have a common native language, and there is no dispute among the members of our language community regarding the difference between a robin and a blackbird, between a brook and a canal, or between a Mercedes and a Volkswagen. But the distinctions that keep us rooted and thereby enable us to grow, the distinctions between the important and the trivial, between beauty and ugliness, and between good and evil, are all of them broadly in dispute. This holds even more when we consider in addition the distinction between the holy and the profane, a distinction that many believe simply has no foundation in reality. In this situation, many think that the only way out is simply to bracket out of education whatever is in dispute, to fashion the basis of education only out of that about which society has a minimal consensus. With respect to everything else, they say we ought simply to expose young people "non-judgmentally" to various possible worldviews. An exposure of this sort is supposed to be what first teaches a person the attitude of general tolerance, and for the rest, when a person cannot avoid making a choice, it teaches the ability to make a free decision. As if it were possible to choose something that one never got to know from the inside!

This way of looking at things is a profound and fateful anthropological and pedagogical error. If a person believes that there are many different paths man could take to reach his goal, he does not infer the resolution to follow one of them in a faithful way. Instead, he draws the inference that there is no need to follow any particular path, and he leaves them all as hypothetical. The pathological inability to make a commitment that afflicts many young adults today is already the product of such an approach to education. We prevent young people from experiencing the power that a demanding view of the world and man has to open up reality, merely because we want to give them the possibility of looking at reality from some other perspective. This is a

great injustice to children.

The premature exposure to the pluralism of our society leads almost inevitably to the death of man's deeper spiritual and intellectual powers; it leads to relativism. Relativism is man's capitulation with respect to the task of acquiring a mature relationship to reality that is worthy of him. It makes man petty and allows him to make everything else petty. He simply levels out everything that is in dispute among people to the lowest common denominator. The result is what Nietzsche described as the last man: "What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?", asks the Last Man, and he blinks. The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. . . . 'We have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink."²

The St. Raphael Children's Home has never swallowed the resignation at the root of the last man. Everything that happens here is borne of the faith that Matthias Claudius expressed in simple words: "We are born for something better." This is not about utopia, an unrealistic dream about making a new man. What we are talking about instead is the insight that it is possible for a man to become new and that he can be new in every moment—not the "last man," but always a "first man" again and again. This sounds unrealistic, and in fact what people tend to accuse this house of is precisely a lack of realism.

An interesting accusation. For it leads to the question what we mean by "reality," and thus what it means to educate one for reality. I already said that Freud is the one who coined the phrase "educating for reality." But what does "reality" mean for Freud? For him, reality means the resistance that man encounters in his pursuit of pleasure. Freud distinguished the pleasure principle from the reality principle. The two are not connected to one another by a meaningful bond, by a "logos." What the individual person is concerned with is for the most part only subjective satisfaction. This he achieves by means of assimilation, contact, and appropriation. Everything that does not unresistingly conform to this striving stands opposed to human happiness. In order to survive, in order to have at least some delight, man has to learn to adapt to this resistant reality, to submit to its conditions, and to work out some sort of compromise with it. Thus, educating for reality means teaching a person to adapt, to compromise with what one cannot change. The only goal of such a theory can be compromise, not friendship, not the affirmation of reality. Reality remains once and for all a threat to one's happiness. And so Freud is simply being consistent when he writes that human civilization fundamentally does not allow people to be happy. One simply has to learn how to put up with it in order to survive.

In the 1960s, during the European cultural revolution, the revolution's protagonist, Herbert Marcuse, proclaimed that Freud's reality principle had come to an end. The society of abundance, he thought, now allowed us to put an end to compromise and to work toward the complete satisfaction of the pleasure principle, of the individual's subjective desires, without regard for any sort of opposing conditions of reality. Instead, we simply had to change these conditions, and we had the ability to do so. "Power to the imagination!" was the motto one found painted on the walls of the Sorbonne in Paris. How long ago all this was, and how distant it is from us now! The first oil crisis—1973—made us aware that we were not living in the land

of plenty. Today we would all be happy if we knew that we would be able somehow to survive in a dignified way. For those who considered the land of plenty to be a state of pleasure, a new slogan was already at hand: “No future!” As if all we had before was a dream that has turned out to be unrealizable.³ The despair over the future has the same origin as the utopian vision of the fulfillment of Freud’s pleasure principle. It stems from a view of the world in which reality is not in the first place and above all a gift, but rather something that represents an obstacle to my self-realization.

How different reality appears in this house! “You are not living in reality!” people have said, and they point to the fact that there aren’t even any televisions here, that they live as if discotheques didn’t even exist. This makes me think of Plato’s famous allegory of the cave. There, people have sat their entire lives chained inside a theater. They take what they can see on the wall to be reality, and if someone wants to lead them outside into the light, because real things can supposedly be seen there, then they say: “He’s crazy! Reality is obviously right here before our eyes!” There are in fact people today who think that what they see on TV is more real than what goes on around them. There is already mass tourism for the “Schwarzwaldklinik”!⁴

The St. Raphael Children’s Home has remained in the real world for 25 years. And when the world, when the living present, when everyday things have their full weight and their full significance, then there is no need to keep anyone from fleeing into the emotional rush of the discotheques. The need doesn’t even arise. What distinguishes this house from others is not that it hides from reality, but that it has more reality, it has greater possibilities to experience reality. Nevertheless, the concept of reality in play here is not a statistical one. Nor should it be. If ninety-nine people suffer from headaches, one can of course suggest that the hundredth person, who does not have a headache, is sick, that he is not normal and not well adapted. One can give him the same pills that the others are swallowing. In that case, they may indeed give him a headache. But health is not something determined by statistical comparisons. That is something that everyone who suffers knows. And if there is a person who is free from suffering, then he would do better to help the ninety-nine than to attempt to adapt himself to them. Christianity has always known this. The Christian doctrine of original sin says exactly this: The statistical average state of humanity is not a state of healthy, mature human existence, but rather the opposite. This is why we cannot draw our educational goals from statistics. As Jean Paul has said, “The child is not to be educated for the present—for this is done without our aid unceasingly and powerfully—but for the remote future, and often in opposition to the immediate future. The spirit which is to be shunned should be known.”⁵

Educating young people for reality includes not imposing the structure of scientific civilization and technological specialization on them in such a way that they never get their feet on the ground. Of course, we live in a civilization that has been influenced by science and is therefore highly abstract. Today one can find attempts to rebel against this, the so-called “alternative lifestyle” communities. But every adult will have to be expected to abstract from the context of life to a certain degree. It all depends on how young people are prepared for this: whether they learn to understand simple life situations or whether the abstract, specialized form of life is so

imposed on them that they remain forever immature and are able to exist only by shifting back and forth from the role of being producers to that of being consumers. It is almost inevitable that people are kept immature when the abstract structures of civilization are not learned in gradual steps that can be imitated, when the concrete experiences of basic life situations do not come first. A home in which the young people are essentially consumers cannot educate them for reality; in fact it cannot educate them at all.

One of the most essential elements of this house is that everyone here is occupied with the necessary tasks of everyday life. Not only is there no TV in this house, there is also no dishwasher. Everyone has chores in the kitchen, everyone is responsible for the garden, everyone has a role to play in cleaning the house and maintaining it. And that includes the educators. As I said at the outset, education is a side-effect. If the head educator's job is to educate, but not to help work in the kitchen or in the garden, to help maintain the building, etc.,—what in fact is the medium of his education supposed to be? How to fill one's free time? As far as I can recall, I have never once heard the expression "free time" in this house. Free time is something empty that then has somehow to be filled. And whatever it is that fills it is automatically denigrated into a "pastime," or "time-filler." We don't say that we "fill our work time," but simply that we work. Work that is done simply to fill the time that we are "on the clock," as everyone knows, is bad work. In this house, people pray, they read, they play, they sing, they ski, they hike, but they do not "kill time." People do not do these things simply because you have to do *something* once work is finished; instead, they do what they do because it is necessary, or because it is helpful, or simply because it is beautiful.

But beauty is not just some ornament to life; it is the very meaning of life. There is nothing more serious, nothing that is more worth pursuing, than beauty. Beauty is what is truly redemptive, because it is what is truly real; it is the *splendor veri*, the splendor of truth, as Thomas Aquinas says. I do not know how many hours were spent practicing the play that you will see later; I suspect in fact that no one here has been counting the hours. On Saturday evening, the musicians practice the music in this room that they will play to wake up the sleepers here on Sunday morning. A great deal of care and reflection went into picking out the pictures that adorn this house. What lies at the center of this home is celebration. For in celebration we experience reality in its most real form. Here, we do not do something because it is good for something else, which we do in turn for yet another reason. We do not celebrate in order to restore our energies to be able to work, but instead we work in order to be able to celebrate. In celebration, everything is simply itself. In celebration, we make the holy present, the absolute present, the ground of all reality. We do not give thanks for this and that particular thing, but rather, as it says in the ancient Christian prayer, "for Your great glory." Here reality appears wholly as it truly is, not as foreign, as begrudging, as frustrating, but as awe-inspiring, powerful, and at the same time as friendly and brightly lit. Whoever has not experienced it in this way will think that celebration is an escape from reality into an illusory world, that it is just another sort of discotheque. The only thing to do with such a person is to invite him to celebrate along with us and in this way to discover for himself what the difference is between illusion and reality.

Children live spontaneously in this reality, as long as one does not break them of the habit. It's in their nature. Especially if they have already left behind, like a nightmare, the experience of a reality that excluded all celebration. Children have a completely immediate sense for the divine. When the brakes are not constantly applied, as happens today in so many families, and children are kept from unfolding their wings, then they are quite quickly able to become the teachers of their educators, as people often experience in this house. If the children's religious sense is able to develop here with such energy, with such magnanimity, it is only because God himself is truly present to the educators in this house, because they speak in the first place, not with the children about God, but above all with God about their children. This is why miracles are not only hoped for in this house, but also experienced. Only the person who believes in miracles is a realist.

So what in the end does it mean to "educate for reality"? What is the goal of education? Its goal is that a person learn to take what is real as real. Reality is not real for every person. Things and other people do not appear to every person as they truly are, but rather under the subjective perspective of what is pleasant or unpleasant, useful or harmful. What do we call it when something—or someone—becomes for us what it or he truly is? In this case we speak of love. Love is when the other becomes real for me. "Educating for reality" is therefore just another word for "educating for love." Love is more than just an emotion. I can feel emotions to the point of tears at the cinema. But that has nothing to do with love, for the people there are of course not real. Love is something realistic; it is the most realistic thing there is. Education, moreover, is something that starts on the outside and moves inward. "Education for love: for in children action awakens desire, though the opposite is the case with men."⁶ To do something for the other and perhaps, if we're lucky, to see how it makes him happy is much more important than many desires to improve the world. Education for reality is taking place whenever opportunities are created, like this, to do something for other people. But the perception of such opportunities, the perception of the reality of the other, presupposes that a child has first become real to himself. And the child becomes real for himself when he is loved, in a manner that is as matter-of-fact as it is unconditional.

Many children live here because previously the minimal amount of love they experienced was lacking either unconditionality or even matter-of-factness. "That's how it always starts!" sobbed a child that had been here in the house for only a few weeks. He sat on the cellar stairs. Some people had yelled at him because he was bad and had slammed the door in their faces. And now he was crying, because he was afraid he would be sent away, just as he had already been sent away from six other houses! Mrs. X said to him: "Listen. We don't like it when you're bad. But send you away? No. After all, you belong to us. You can be as bad as you want, but you still belong to us. We are certainly not going to ship you off somewhere else!" And through the tears, the child became radiant. He began to discover something new: here, he was unconditionally accepted, even if he sometimes got a swat. Here, he was something precious. He was real. This is one of the most important experiences that there is.

There is a responsible way and an irresponsible way to treat oneself. A person can neglect himself and his immediate surroundings; he can neglect his head and his heart just as much as

his bedroom and his clothes. To educate for reality also means to teach children that they are absolutely real for themselves, that their identity does not consist simply in what they are for themselves, nor in what they are for others; it means to teach them that they belong neither simply to themselves, nor simply to others. They belong to God. And this means, translated into practical terms, that their importance, their preciousness, does not depend either on themselves or on some other person. They are important, because they are real for God. They are loved.

To awaken this consciousness is the most extraordinary thing that can happen in a house like this. And it does indeed happen. When one considers the later *curriculum vitae* of so many of the people who once lived in this house, they are admittedly not all pure success stories. Inherited burdens, early childhood experiences and wounds often imply a fate that no one can overcome. And yet it makes a difference, a decisive difference, whether someone, when he is standing in mud up to his neck, just gives up on himself, as it were, or whether he recalls the word that has credibly been communicated to him here: “You shall never perish, and no one will take you out of my hand” (Jn 10:28).

Robert Spaemann is a preeminent German philosopher.

1 [The German word translated as “education” in this essay is *Erziehung*, which is more literally translated as “upbringing,” i.e., the rearing of children. The word “educators,” here, is “*Erzieher*,” literally, the “upbringers,” those who are responsible for raising children. – Ed.]

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1982), 129.

3 [Spaemann’s sentence here, translated literally, is “As if there were nothing between the trees that grow in heaven, and indeed there weren’t any trees.” It is apparently a comment on the German expression, “Die Bäume wachsen nicht im Himmel,” i.e., “Trees don’t grow in heaven,” which means “You can’t have everything.” –Ed.]

4 [“Schwarzwaldklinik,” which ran from 1985 to 1989, was one of the most popular TV series in Germany. It is, as it were, the German version of “General Hospital”—which indeed is said to be one of the programs it was modeled after. —Ed.]

5 Jean Paul Richter, *Levana, or: The Doctrine of Education* (Boston: D.C. Heath & Company, 1890), sec. 30, 117.

6 Jean Paul, *Levana*, 348.
