

## ON LEARNING

In the frenzy of activity and pressing necessities of Art Center life, it is easy to lose sight of what we are actually trying to do; sheer activity can blinds us to all other issues and a sort of Art Center myth has grown up that this constant doing and staying up all night *is* learning.- this is what you pay for.

By three quarters of the way through the term I see around me much frenzied activity but not much learning; panicked under the pressure of work, students put their head down, complete the given assignment and move on to the next one stopping to ask only whether it is 'right' or 'wrong' and what their grade is. The activity has become external, not internal. Most students think that they work very hard and they do stay up half the night involved in completing set projects; I have the image of people who, told to cross a fast flowing river to get to a certain point, jump straight in and flounder as best they may in the water and lie panting on the other side pleased to be across, irrespective as to whether they are in the right place or not- few stop to think why they are going, whether they want to get to where they are asked to go, or to look for a bridge or build a boat. The process becomes inefficient because often the student ceases to experience him or herself as 'responsible' for the process and instead sees it as something that is being done *to* him or her.

Learning is an art; it is one that has to be learnt and practised like any other art and one that takes a conscious effort on our part. To begin with we pick it up unconsciously; the child has a natural desire and ability to learn, but then, in school, something happens: in many cases learning becomes disassociated from pleasure or usefulness and becomes a bind of boredom and necessity.

The art of learning is ignored and the process becomes inefficient and haphazard.

Two myths confuse the issue; the first is a general, twentieth century, one- that of instant gratification, that one can achieve satisfaction without effort:

that you can buy it. Achieving anything is hard work and satisfaction is a *result* of the work; nothing a teacher can do to you, no secret new method or trick will make you learn (and yet have you seen all the advertisements for learning a language without effort, getting fit without exercise or losing weight without dieting?). The second myth is that described above concerning the *nature* of that work.

The hard work required to learn is that of attention and focus; it is necessary to take the time to bring our whole concentration to bear on what is to be learnt (this is a skill which we are very poor at as a society which requires the ability to select and use thousands of conflicting signals fired at us all the time and to reject that which is not useful- advertising and television have been instrumental in creating this change in our habits of perception as Neil Postman has pointed out in 'Amusing Ourselves to Death'). To understand what is meant by real attention, look at the absorbed attention of children who have the ability to focus their whole being on what they are doing. As adults we do it when something is really important to us and at these times we learn very fast; I failed to learn French during eight years at school, but picked it up within months when I fell in love with a French girl. I learnt to cook without really trying, yet have never mastered the most fundamental working of a car. The *work* involved is that of keeping the attention focused.

To learn is to change; to alter one's behaviour or mental 'set' to see the world differently than before, this requires great effort and will on our part; the mind does not want to think. It wishes to create a stable sense out of the universe which takes away the strain of the constant necessity to understand. Few are the people who remain their whole lives constantly willing to adjust their mental picture of the world; it is much easier to fall back on comfortable patterns, truisms, authority; to deny or ignore new information. As a teacher it is easier to use my authority and age to 'keep students in their place' than to question my preconceptions and answer difficult questions. As a student it is easy to become defensive and 'switch off' or to let a standard view of what a teacher is like to stand in the way of actually hearing what he or she is

saying. It was easier to silence Galileo with threat of torture than to rethink theology.

To make such alterations to behaviour, one has to be open and non judgemental which:

*"...requires that I go beyond the idiosyncratic and egocentric perception of immediate experience. Mature awareness is only possible when I have digested and compensated for the biases and prejudices that are the residue of my personal history. Awareness of what presents itself to me involves a double movement of attention: silencing the familiar and welcoming the strange. Each time I approach a strange object, person, or event, I have a tendency to let my present needs, past experiences, or expectations for the future determine what I will see. If I am to appreciate the uniqueness of any datum, I must be sufficiently aware of my preconceived ideas and characteristic emotional distortions to bracket them long enough to welcome strangeness and novelty into my perceptual world. This discipline of bracketing, compensating, or silencing requires sophisticated self-knowledge and courageous honesty. Yet without this discipline each present moment is only the repetition of something already seen or experienced. In order for genuine novelty to emerge, for the unique presence of things, persons, or events to take root in me, I must undergo a decentralisation of the ego."*

*To a Dancing God': Sam Keen*

- such an openness takes constant effort, it requires the suspension of pre-judgement, to really be open to what is happening. To be creative.

This requires the ability to listen, which is perhaps our weakest skill; as the psychiatrist Scott Peck wrote: "Listening well is an exercise of attention and by necessity hard work. It is because they do not realise this or because they are not willing to do the work that most people do not listen well." It also takes the openness I discussed above; we tend to listen to what we think people are going to say or to those ideas that happen to coincide to our own, editing the rest. I recently set a class some exercises to do for homework; I explained the reason and the aim, I showed examples of what each exercise should look like; I asked if anyone had any questions or did not understand. Yet, when a student who missed the class asked the rest what she had to do she received a conflicting story from every student.

Having listened to what is being propounded, having opened yourself to what is new, learning requires critical involvement; this does not mean destructive criticism, but a careful weighing of the new information against what which you already have and against your own experience. It is out of this consideration that values can be set. Not permanent ones that become atrophied and inappropriate, but ones that help us to take another step up in the progress of our education and expansion as human beings, not forgetting, as Umberto Ecco wrote in 'The Name of the Rose' that:

*"The order that our minds imagine is like a net, or a ladder, built to attain something. But afterwards you must throw the ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless".*