

Morbid Conversation in Teaching and the Catholic Liberal Education Ideal

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Generally, education makes the learner competent to confront reality and life. Liberal education delivers the wherewithal or *tools* for such confrontation. Suggesting the existence of an objective essence for being human—the objectivity of *human nature*—the learner must develop properly as a human being. This proper development toward some already existing model for a human being implies an already existing objective form for human nature.

The liberal education curriculum represents all the areas of human knowledge. The curriculum must also be logically integrated so that, in a bird's eye view, all the disciplines will be seen together, in a harmonious relationship one to the other. The educational plan should give learners “a total view” of how liberal education touches reality and life. The curriculum, therefore, must be global, comprehensive, and all-embracing, so that the graduated learners will be successful in evaluating all those life situations and matters in which they find themselves. Liberal education must also be purposive, or teleological, rendering an integrated notion of the design and purpose of creation.

As Catholic educators, our position should be very clear. God is our goal. The prevalence of relativism and subjectivism in the Western world has distorted and confused educational ends that were once definitive and clear. On a local level, educational purposes have changed, becoming more representative of subjective feelings and opinions, reflecting an philosophical relativism that is gaining ground in today's world.

From a religious perspective, relativism lends itself comfortably to sin and self-centeredness, for relativism can resonate favorably with the subjectivity of human condition, making man forget metaphysically and theologically where he came from. Relativism is winning in the world—it is winning over educators, as well. We should be able to combat and gain ground by rightly teaching and fostering God's plan and objectives for the universe. It is a faith position to which relativists and subjectivist can always be converted.

Today, educators are drawn from realism to relativism. As realists we believe that, outside of us, there exists an objective reality that we are bound, intellectually, to discover. Relativists, in varying ways and degrees, deny this. The path from realism to relativism can be analyzed in pathological terms: Namely, it is not unreasonable to consider extreme philosophical relativism as a legitimized expression of perverse emotional needs—an emotional disorientation—representing, in Freudian terms, an arrested development in emotional growth; *i.e.*, the person remains arrested or fixated emotionally in an earlier developmental phase as, for example, being stuck in a fantasy stage, in the narcissism of terrible two's or in the narcissism of adolescence. If we remain arrested or fixated, it is because we are either unable or unwilling—depending on the amount of freedom available and the gravity of subjective distortion—to face reality squarely; namely, we are not trying—or can not try—to go farther in human development; *i.e.*, in becoming better as human beings. It would be interesting to study which of the two philosophical framework commitments was more prone to mental disorder: the relativist-subjectivist philosophical viewpoint and commitment? or the Aristotelian-Thomist realist philosophical viewpoint and commitment?

Considered in this fashion, relativism and subjectivism, in the last analysis, amounts to the same thing. Everything is subjective inasmuch as it is how the relativist sees the question and, again, how the relativist has thought it out according to his particular perceptions and interpretations. This is also true of the realist, except that the realist, it seems, subjects his perception and his interpretations to a more rigorous dialectic to demonstrate their objective validity. In the case of the relativist, reality redounds to him and to his kind, as persons who have made decisions, as they claim without taking into account any already acknowledged metaphysical guidelines, about which they boast, have been dismissed summarily and subjectively. The relativist argument, in the public square, will be won rhetorically and politically, not

intellectually and logically.

Here are some indicators of this pervasive relativism in our society. One such sign of the perversity of relativism is the very popular song *My Way (A Mi Manera)*. The lyrics suggest a soul who failed in his relationship with others, and, finally, finding himself alone, he, in reflecting on how he handled each relationship, is consoled by the fact that he was consistently faithful to doing things *his way*.

Relativism and subjectivism is a dangerous threat to human society, because having everything your way is a danger. It is a red light which is happening as we live. As realists we should not leave the problem there, but, rather, we should attempt to help by offering solutions: When we happen upon such subjective and relativist situations in real life, it is precisely at that moment that we find our mission which is to row against the current. At times, we get tired. When a psychotically plagued soul suffering from delusions or hallucinations says he hears or sees something unbelievable to the ordinary person, it is pointless to tell him that he does not hear or see what he subjectively, and, therefore, actually experiences, for, he, because of his disorder, does incontestably see and hear what is, in fact, objectively not there. The most we can say is that I and others nearby do not experience what you experience.

So explained—and there are many approaches to be taken: For one, the problem of relativism, subjectivism and narcissism must appear well thought out and accurate, so that, as far as the learner is concerned, work can begin on the solution. The learner must be capable of attacking subjectivism, relativism, narcissism, materialism, and their fruits which are nihilism, skepticism, and cynicism, as well as knowing the argument for their defense. The solution to such a massive social problem—from a realist point of view—must be approached individually with love and respect. Individually, the subjectivism-relativism package—can be reversed or, better expressed, changed, at least, on an individual level where the change should begin; *i.e.*, individuals can be set straight and saved, as the realist would affirm. No great work is securely nor satisfyingly achieved without unselfish effort and personal sacrifice; so, to bring society round to healthy rational and critical thinking will take an investment of time, energy and commitment.

In class, the students—if an atmosphere of honest and respectful dialogue has been established—will, at times, crudely hit the teachers right in the face with arguments justifying a materialistic life of relativism, subjectivism and narcissism. Liberal education teachers must expect—if they have won the confidence of the learner—the same adolescent rebellion that parents experience at home. Imprudently aggressive behavior must be dealt with calmly and respectfully, demanding of the learner what is expected of the teachers themselves: A honest hearing of the state of the question (a description of just where they stand), sincere attention given to arguments—no matter how flawed in which case there must always be criteriological insistence that the accepted basic principles and corollaries of logic be respected; also, that the arguments have criteriological validity in the sense that they be founded on sound formal logic (the reasoning is correct) and healthy material logic (the facts of the argument represent truth or reality), a humble and maturely adult presentation, and a willingness to heed respectfully counter arguments. Learners should be taught that, in the setting of higher education when they present arguments in the public square, they are expected to abide by a certain protocol of respectful scholarship and civility; moreover, learners should be aware that in forums of high scholarship, there is no tolerance of subjective prattle offensive to the ears of scholarly minds prepared to enter upon honest, intelligent and civil debate. In the last analysis, whether or not learners have acceded to a Catholic Aristotelian-Thomist worldview is not as important as the teacher's noble interest and pure other-centered love for the learner, whatever his honest and deliberated view may be.

As instructor or mentor, the teacher has the right to insist and encourage not only that students do their best to explain clearly the theoretical foundations and implications of their own point of view, but that they also give evidence that they have studied and understood the teacher's Aristotelian-Thomist-Catholic viewpoint, or—for that matter—any other viewpoint, to which they might be taking exception. Only in this irenic way of mutual human and academic respect can two independent thinkers of good will, enter into intelligent and respectful conversation, dialogue, and friendly discussion about differences. The maintenance of such open dialogue is essential, so that the exponents of groups of different philosophical frames do not form impenetrable barriers representing either indifference or stubborn closed-mindedness. Open dialogue presumes the groundwork and starting point of productive communication, of mutual

understanding and continued optimism and of hope for on-going mutual learning. This positive Christian approach helps students to organize their thinking, to frame worthy argumentation for their point of view, and to stay focused and clear about their own contribution, only insofar as it is related—although conditionally or even negatively—to what has been proffered by their interlocutor. The role of the teacher or learner is not to win an argument nor to talk or lecture down to anybody, but, rather, to enter into a creative uncovering of truth through productive, friendly dialogue. It is important that both teacher and learner know this.

Conscience distinguishes human beings from other living things. In argument, the function of conscience becomes the practical intellect deciding, from general principles of faith and reason, the ethical quality, or the goodness or badness, of the discursive action in which a person now participates. This reasoning faculty also separates human beings from irrational animals who act solely, not by reason, but by instinct. The marvel of animal instinct sometimes give the false impression that some animals also enjoy reason.

The freedom to choose is necessary for the execution of human conscience. Once a decision is intellectually made about the most appropriate action to exercise in a particular case, human beings must use another faculty that gives or does not give consent for the execution of that action. The human faculty, or potency, that gives the go-ahead for action that must be engaged is called the *will* or, simply, *free will*. Freedom is the possibility of making decisions after having reasoned correctly. Freedom is having the possibility of choosing.

At this point, two human potencies, or faculties, are assumed: The *intellect*, on the one hand, which is the faculty that makes the practical judgement about what might be the best thing to do under the circumstances; and the *will*, on the other hand, by means of which a human being can concede (1) to act or to withdraw from acting or (2) to opt for one thing from among other possible options. Freedom, which depends on these two human potencies, is important to the authentic realization of liberal education, because the human being must be fully aware of what they are doing; otherwise, complete freedom becomes impossible. Therefore, how learners must act must be thought out by the intellect and the actual choosing is occasioned and granted concession by the will. According to St. Thomas, the speculative distinction between the intellect and will is valid, for intellectually there exist two faculties, each with its own object: *i.e.*, the object of the intellect is truth; the object of the will is the good. However, for human freedom to take place, the intellect and the will must always work in concert, functionally (Stump, 2003). The relativist-subjectivist faculty of most secular higher education puts the realist student at an uncomfortable, and often morbidly manipulative, disadvantage.

Morbid conversation: The destructive pedagogy of poisonous narcissism. Both teacher and learner should be aware of the danger of allowing students to become morbidly formed as extensions of the teacher; *i.e.*, as a replica of the teacher. Most dramatically, the case appears in higher education in the form of university teachers who unjustly penalize students with failing, poor grades, badgering or mockery in the classroom for not accepting the teacher's personal opinions especially when the point in question is politically controversial. This case is not uncommon as the April 2012 study of National Association of Scholars study has demonstrated. That study, titled *A Crisis of Competence: The Corrupting Effect of Political Activism in the University of California; a Report Prepared for the Regents of the University of California*, showed that professors do not give political balance in the classroom; that is, the study has demonstrated that, for professors of the University of California—and by implication, other state universities—a liberal political agenda is usually proposed, enlisting, later, a social agenda; once the agenda is in place, students are, then, recruited and indoctrinated into realizing that established social agenda. If the professors were dedicated to justice and to the principle that, in the classroom, both sides of the argument should be presented fairly and in a balanced way, so that the students themselves might have the opportunity to make up their own minds, the scenario would be ideal. But, this is not the case: Professors are increasingly committed to the notion that it is the teacher's job to inculcate and indoctrinate in the "correct way" of politics, which, of course, is their biased liberal way. The team of American Association of Scholars who investigated this condition concluded that there exists a

well-documented pathology of the modern university, but the fact that this problem is not confined

to the University of California does not lessen the need to deal with it forthrightly here. If it is a problem everywhere, it is certainly a problem here. If it is something that needs to be dealt with everywhere, it surely needs to be dealt with in the nation's foremost system of public higher education. According to a recent (2007) Zogby poll, a majority (58%) of the public now believes that the problem of faculty political bias is a very serious one. Yet our concern is not with political opinions or bias per se, but rather with the associated question of competence and quality of education. When individual faculty members and sometimes even whole departments decide that their aim is to advance social justice as they understand it rather than to teach the subject that they were hired to teach with all the analytical skill that they can muster, the quality of teaching and research is compromised. This is an inevitable result because, as we shall show, these two aims are incompatible with each other, so that the one must undermine the other. (Ellis, Gesheker, Wood, & Balch, 2012, p. 2)

This American Association of Scholars study, upon closing, quoted James Piereson, senior fellow and director of the Center for the American University who had recently written in *The Weekly Standard*, "The left university should not be replaced by the right university. It should be replaced by the real university, dedicated to liberal education and higher learning" (Piereson, 2005, para. 44).

This qualitative study is concerned primarily with the educational development of the student; particularly, with liberal education and its learner. With this in mind, what immediately follows is an attempt to explain, psychologically and educationally, the poisonous pedagogy and, to a certain extent, the pernicious long-range implications of the arrogant presumption of university professors who assume to themselves the right to impose unfairly their political view on trusting young minds. Many students are unsuspecting that, in a university dedicated to pursuit of objective reality and truth, they just not be given a balanced and objective view of reality. If contrived biased indoctrination be the case, the youths are destined, not be enlightened, but to be *used*.

In an unpublished paper titled *When Narcissus Teaches: Teaching, Mentoring and the Danger of Narcissism*, Carol Lakey Hess (2002) showed how narcissism can pathologically warp a teacher-learner relationship if not heedfully detected, carefully monitored and conscientiously looked after. Unbridled and undetected pathological narcissism in the classroom can do serious damage to young learners who generally trust the academic competence and psychological soundness of their teachers.

What follows are but a few paragraphs from a 19-page historical, anthropological and psychological study with pedagogical implications of narcissistic tendencies in teachers as distinguished, by degree, from a full-blown narcissistic personality disorder. Hess makes it clear that her paper serves

to extend the concept of narcissism to a discussion of *educational* relationships. Narcissistic teaching is teaching persons who are subjectively (but unconsciously) perceived as part of the self. Narcissistic mentoring involves the love/approval of another person because that person mirrors the self. (Hess, 2002, para. 4)

Hess, then, focuses on *narcissistic patterns in teaching relationships* rather than on identifying teachers with a *Narcissistic Personality Syndrome*. She introduces the reader to the mythological roots and character of clinical narcissism, touching on the traits of the *Narcissistic Personality Disorder* for the unique purpose of uncovering how *narcissist dynamics* warp the teaching process.

With regard to the frequency of narcissistic patterns in the educational setting, psychoanalytical theory suggests a possible parallel in education: For example, just as some psychoanalysts believe that "all people are narcissistic; the difference is only one of degree" (Fine, 1986, p. 67). Hess, falling back on that assumption, stated that "it might be said that all or most educational situations reflect the dynamics of narcissism, the difference being in degree. Mentoring, in particular, is highly vulnerable to the dynamics of narcissistic approval" (Hess, 2002, para. 4). Hess set out in her paper to name (1) processes that inhibited the teacher's own creativity, possibly having left residual pain, and (2) processes that teachers, in carrying out their educational relationships, may have inherited unawares.

Narcissism can be traced to the myth of Narcissus that centers on a beautiful young man who saw his reflection in the still waters of a forest pool and unknowingly fell in love with that reflected image. With repeated attempts to grasp his image as the waters kept returning to stillness, he forgot to eat, gradually wasting away unto death. Narcissistic love patterns can be found in the works of Socrates, Plato, and, in modern times, in the studies of Sigmund Freud.

Psychoanalyst Martin Bergmann, in an article titled *The Legend of Narcissus*, stated that “narcissistic love is a love for a person other than the self, perceived subjectively as part of the self” (Bergmann, 1984, p. 394). Alice Miller (1990) in her book *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, stated that

a person relates to someone *narcissistically* if he or she experiences that person *not as the center of their own independent activity* but as part of his or herself. If the person does not behave as the narcissistic one expects or wishes, he or she may be disappointed, offended or even enraged; the narcissist feels, almost as if an arm ceased to obey us. (Miller, 1990, p. 34)

In education, teachers teach narcissistically if they instruct learners who are unconsciously perceived by the teacher as part of the teacher’s own self; that is, mentoring becomes narcissistic when the love or approval of the person who is helped is subjectively perceived or *emotionally felt* as mirroring the mentor’s own self. Miller “identifies the way in which talented individuals [*e.g.*, students]—those with particular gifts for intuiting the expectations of others and for selectively attuning to those expectations—are susceptible to narcissistic patterns” (Hess, 2002, par. 3).

To explain the dangers of narcissistic distortion in the teaching-learning situation, an understanding of the construct *selfobject* from Heinz Kohut’s “self theory” is in order: Kohut (1980) assumed that a child needs to sense that he or she is reflected as a source of respect and integrity as that child is cared for. Heinz Kohut coined the term “selfobject” to describe the empathically responsive persons (*e.g.* caregivers) who mirror (to the child) and who confirm, corroborate and support the child’s growing sense of self (Kohut, 1980, pp. 478-479).

Among the great variety of *selfobject* relations that support the cohesion, vigor, and harmony of the adult self, are cultural selfobjects—*e.g.*, the writers, artists, and political leaders of the group and of the nation to which a person feels he belongs (Kohut, 1984). In consideration of the teacher-student relationship—applying the dynamics of the analyst-analysand therapy (of psychoanalysis) to the educational situation—there is on the part of the student

the need to receive confirming, approving attention from the analyst [*i.e.*, in education, the teacher as caregiver] and affirmation of the self’s greatness and perfection in the *mirror transference*; the need to experience the [teacher] analyst as similar to the self, as someone who shares the individual’s attitudes, concerns, feelings, likes, and dislikes, in the *alterego or twinship transference*; and the need to fuse with the [teacher] analyst, who is perceived as perfect and all powerful, and thus to take on the [teacher’s] analyst’s power, calm strength, and perfection in the *idealizing transference*. (Bouson, 1989, p. 18)

Although intimately linked to psychoanalytic theory, this just-mentioned Bouson citation demonstrates, *mutatis mutandis*, the importance of teachers as educational caregivers who must be aware of the great influence they bear on students dynamically in the teacher-student setting. This means that whenever, in any teacher-student professional contact, there might arise experiences of high emotional content (positive or negative), teachers must look, first and foremost, into themselves to discover what it personally is all about. For the teacher, these are opportunities for intellectual and emotion growth, taking place among human beings in the only field and at the only point where authentic human growth can take place—whether at school, in marriage, in child-rearing or any situation of continued human intimate communication. During such times, teachers must have recourse to honest introspection, prayer, contemplation, consultation with experts in the religious and mental health fields, or to similar areas of assistance.

Teachers, finally, must be ever aware that during emotionally charged times, there will be a

correspondingly strong temptations to resort to psychological defense mechanisms, strategies, or dynamics like *displacement* or *rationalization*. Such defensive strategies deny or reject a problem evoking affective discomfort by postponing or, even, by dismissing a necessary, healthy resolution—if the teacher does not know the psychological source of the problem, there is even more urgency for immediate attention, for it will not just go away. Yielding readily to dismiss such temptations could, itself, be an indicator of the gravity of the issue.

For more emotionally mature teachers, such problem resulting from “man’s fallen human condition”, are nothing more than opportunities for more personal self-knowledge, positive change, and continued emotional growth and competence. When such opportunities arise, it is extremely important that the teacher figure out how the learner sees the teacher; this will be very helpful in discovering what unconscious messages the teacher might be sending to the student, unawares.

Teachers are not a therapists; their job is not to identify emotional scars, nor to heal the residual pain of their students’ past trauma nor to assuage the present suffering of life’s problems and wounds. Teachers have the obligation, however, to respond appropriately not only as individuals with academic competence and authority, but also as other-centered human beings with sufficient self-knowledge of personal human woundedness and of the meaning of strong emotions that serve as an alarm indicating the need of immediate, appropriate action.

Alice Miller (1990) writes of the *poisonous pedagogy* in child rearing. Her goal is to delineate and expose *narcissistic pedagogy*, particularly in higher education. The core of narcissistic pedagogy is that the teacher experiences students “not as a center of their own activity” but as a part of the teacher’s self. Hess (2002) makes use of Miller’s goals to identify and reveal narcissistic pedagogy, in order to describe, by means of examples, major players in the narcissistic pedagogy dynamic. Hess (2002) invited her students and readers of her paper to

. . . imagine the following learning environment. The charismatic Professor Narcissus attracts varieties of students, including vulnerable students . . . who have previously had their voices quelled, and who are seeking words of wisdom to repeat. Professor Narcissus, largely unconsciously, looks out on the sea of students before him. He fails to notice most of them, and he turns away from those for whom he has little use. [He notices some] . . . but their words are inadequate, lacking, not fully satisfying. They do not say enough of what he wants to hear. But then, his gaze falls on one student who seems extraordinary. That student admires him, and that student mirrors back to him all that he values in himself. His thirst for admiration and mirroring from this student knows no end. He thinks he has found a protégée, another to engage and relate to. He thinks he admires this other in return, but what he doesn’t realize is that he really loves a repetition of his own words. And, he does not admit that he will only stay connected to this protégée so long as Mini-Narcissus mirrors what he seeks. He has unwittingly fallen in love with himself and admired his own reflection. . . . And, little does Professor Narcissus realize that he is starving, rather than nourishing, his intellect. With no independent ideas to engage with, he is not in genuine intellectual relationship. His vitality and creativity waste away. (Hess, 2002, par. 28)

Making use of the just-presented scenario, Hess (2002) noted that it is easy to see how the personality disorder termed Narcissistic got its name. The fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM-IV)* states: “Symptoms of this disorder (narcissistic) include but are not limited to

- Reacts to criticism with anger, shame, or humiliation
- May take advantage of others to reach their own goals
- Tends to exaggerate their own importance, achievements, and talents
- Imagines unrealistic fantasies of success, beauty, power, intelligence, or romance
- Requires constant attention and positive reinforcement from others
- Easily becomes jealous
- Lacks empathy and disregards the feelings of others
- Obsessed with oneself

- Mainly pursues selfish goals
- Trouble keeping healthy relationships
- Is easily hurt and rejected
- Sets unrealistic goals
- Wants “the best” of everything
- Appears as tough-minded or unemotional (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

Hess commented on this DSM-IV list of characteristics for Narcissistic:

Relationships alternate between idealization and devaluation. . . . Narcissistic personalities are an ambiguous blend of “hard pride” and “delicate frame,” “man” and “boy.” The Narcissist is self-absorbed, but easily wounded if admiration and attention are not forthcoming. The Narcissist craves admiration, and often gets it, but is always thirsting for more. The Narcissist searches for ideal love, but the love object is either idealized when there is mirroring or abandoned when the mirroring is imperfect. (Hess, 2002, par. 29)

Hess concluded from this that there are two central dynamics that make up “narcissistic pedagogy”: The teacher’s need for mirroring (reversal of the normal narcissistic flow) and the teacher’s corresponding lack of empathy. To demonstrate these two needs, Hess (2002) continued with another example:

Consider the actual case of Professor Juno. She had grandiose dreams of uncovering the order of the universe. She loved being center stage in the classroom, and she drew large numbers of students to her classes. She would offer her theories with charisma and energy, and she had a way of making electrically charged eye contact with students who gazed at her enrapt. Many students were drawn to her energy, and they too became inflamed with passion for grand questions. Some students, though, were clearly preferred. Those who most perfectly, in terms of ability and accuracy, reflected the positions of Professor Juno were the chosen ones. Many vied for the spots, but few were able to reflect her views perfectly enough. Those who came the closest were singled out to have their papers placed on library reserve, in the file labeled: Exemplary Papers. Those few learned not to criticize Professor Juno, and they learned that they would be especially loved if they tore apart the theories of Professor Juno’s intellectual adversaries—some of whom she deemed “demonic.” She was uncomfortable with theodicy (questioning God); she claimed it was presumptuous. Thus it was, that neither she nor God (as she portrayed *Him*) could be challenged. Professor Juno occasionally allowed others to lead a discussion in class, but she always intervened and redirected the discussion if it was not headed toward her theoretical agendas (which were fairly circumscribed). She was especially on the look out for an heir, but time and time again as she grasped her heir, the heir fragmented before her eyes and fled. One heir-apparent, a successful mirror to Professor Juno, started echoing less [the voice of Professor Juno] and began to speak her own voice. Professor Juno withdrew all support and went in search of another heir. (Hess, 2002, para. 31)

Hess described a narcissistic teacher as one who expects students to mirror the teacher’s needs—admiration and loyalty being principal needs. It is easy to see how students can become simply “narcissistic supplies at the teacher’s disposal”. If the student fails to fulfill the teacher’s narcissistic needs, the teacher acts as if betrayed and attacked, disguising narcissistic rage with such behaviors as deliberately avoiding eye contact, maintaining a rigid body language, and withholding formerly generous expressions of recognition (Hess, 2002, para. 33).

Students in narcissistic learning environments, in order to survive, learn to make the proper adjustments to satisfy the teacher’s needs. Such accommodation necessitates a suppression of the student’s own tastes, needs, ideals, and choices. Hess described an extreme narcissistic teaching situation in these terms:

The relationship between the teacher and the students can become almost cultic, a leader-devotee dynamic. In such cases, narcissistically vulnerable students idealize the teacher as powerful,

brilliant, and historically important. (Hess, 2002, par. 35)

Marion S. Goldman, in an article titled *Alice Miller's Contributions to the Sociology of Religion*, described this morbid interpersonal dynamic as an "interaction with the ideal [that] confirms the devotee's own personal worth, indicating that he or she deserves to be connected with someone who has extraordinary powers" (Goldman, 1997, p. 209). In such cases, the teacher/leader has an idiosyncratic system with which the teacher supplies emotional satisfaction with the guarantee of personal transformation for the student, on the condition that the learner continue offering the teacher blind fidelity and cultic devotion. "The central problem with narcissistic education is that *there is no real other with whom the teacher relates*" (Hess, 2002, para. 64).

Healthy conversation in education: Heroic generosity and creative productivity. In spite of the existence of such morbidly narcissistic situations in education, there are many academically competent and emotionally mature teachers and mentors whose behavior borders daily on being heroically generous and creatively productive to their educational community. In determining whether or not there exists poisonous narcissism in a particular teaching relationship, the serious educator will proceed cautiously, for in healthy teaching situations, excellent teachers, in a very healthy fashion, joyfully share with their students many things in which they have an extraordinary and special interest. Unlike narcissist teachers, the conversationally healthy teachers find their motivation—in which their own narcissism is consciously monitored—in being other-centered and generous: With no hidden agenda, they authentically want joyfully to share their competence and lives with others. These emotionally balanced and academically well-prepared teachers look forward to disclosing to their students the happiness and satisfaction of their intellectual discovery and rewarding personal experiences; these teachers have no need to enslave naïve students in a mutually destructive narcissistic teaching relationship. In defense of the healthy educator, Hess described teachers with conversational education methods that are both sound and rewarding for the entire educational community (Hess, 2002).

Well integrated, other-centered teachers relate positively to their students, making use of processes, methods and practices that reflect virtue and, therefore, healthy behaviors. Objectively, virtue—because it is the habit of doing what is truly good—redounds unselfishly to the benefit of the learner, the teacher, and the entire educational community; subjectively, the same players—teacher, learner, and community—reap positive motivations and enhanced self-worth for having invested greatly in a personal struggle to know themselves; *e.g.*, for admitting that they belong to fallen human nature with tendencies to narcissism, emotional stagnation, and refusal to change and grow. Evidence of such sound self-enhancing processes are (1) the teacher's very passion for certain things that becomes a source of general motivation and enthusiasm and (2) the teacher's charisms, (*e.g.*, native gifts possessed by the teacher) that are exercised primarily for the common good of humankind, but, nonetheless, allow the teacher to shine, adding to the teacher's healthy self-esteem (Hess, 2002).

Hess described academically competent and emotionally healthy teachers not afflicted with the scourge of pernicious narcissism. For those in higher education, the goal is not constant mirroring—as mirroring is required for the infant and child—but some mirroring is required, nonetheless. Becoming more mature does not imply that the human being will be completely emotionally free of the need for the approval and affirmation of others—for human beings are not made that way. As personality and identity become more subjectively integrated making the human being more aware of who he or she is, empathic needs are reduced, but not completely eliminated—we need to know that we are good and valuable, especially when we are down. The frequency of image endorsement needed in infancy, childhood, and adolescence should not be the same as that required of a "more" mature individual. Hess described this need reduction in the following way:

What was needed in infancy is not needed in adulthood. Still, good education does include empathic response from the teacher. By empathic response, however, I do not mean unchallenging affirmation. In terms of adult education, empathic response involves *the commitment to see the student as a separate (but related) person in pursuit of her own ideas even as she engages the ideas of her teacher.* (Hess, 2002, para. 60)

This is the basic distinction between narcissistic pedagogy and healthy conversational pedagogy: Narcissistic pedagogy is characterized, on the one hand, by the teaching of students who are subjectively perceived as part of one's self [the teacher's] rather than as a center of their own autonomous behavior. Healthy conversational pedagogy is characterized, on the other hand, by the teaching of students who are subjectively perceived as objectively independent others *who matter for being uniquely who they are—i.e., valued others—who function nobly on the strength of their own voice and personal integrity* (Hess, 2002).

If narcissistic behavior unconsciously serves to increase the morbidity of the teacher- student relationship, Hess optimistically affirms that teacher vigilance concerning the awareness of feelings and of real motivations in the teacher-learner relationship can reverse the process toward other-centeredness and mental health. Hess (2002) gives these behaviors as indications of movement toward wholeness and health in the teacher-learner relations: “A teacher's capacity to support spontaneity, a teacher's sensitivity to the “signals of voice” inherent in partial repetition, and a teacher's capacity to survive her own displacement” (Hess, 2002, para. 63).

Healthy conversational education—as opposed to narcissistic pedagogy—begins when teachers know what they “unconsciously look for and prefer as they engage learners. “At the first level of critical examination, the teacher makes herself aware of places she may need to discipline her unconscious, and unfair, preferences.” At the next level, the teacher can promote a healthy learning environment by exposing boundaries in classrooms, for it is helpful to name those boundaries so people have a sense for the field in which they are playing (Hess, 2002, para. 66).

“At yet another level, the teacher shows her face, so to speak. She offers her cherished ideas and values for both gazing and critical examination. And, she seeks to have the offering respected, though not so much admired. There is a difference, however, between offering from the sheer pleasure and joy in one's passions and expecting to have those passions imitated—energy for the subject-matter rather than echoing of the perspective is the goal.

Yet, the teacher also allows for learners partially to repeat her words, to add to or correct her words, and all this on the way to speaking their own voice. Even in a relationship as close as a mentoring relationship, the ultimate role of the mentor is to help students articulate their particular voice. When the mentor is also able to receive from the voice she nurtures, conversational education takes place. Kohut himself offers an example of healthy conversational—non poisonous pedagogy—education that is mutually respectful:

If there is one lesson that I have learned during my life as an analyst, it is the lesson that what my patients tell me is likely to be true—that many times when I believed that I was right and my patients were wrong, it turned out, though often only after a prolonged search, that *my* rightness was superficial whereas *their* rightness was profound. (Kohut, 1984, pp. 93-94)

This Kohut quotation (1984) makes clear that good teachers and good analysts must be persons of great humility, for humility is truth, the very goal of liberal education: In this context, humility is the truth, or reality, about the teacher or analyst as God sees that person stripped of all shame and pretense. Jesus offers teachers the example of His life: “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart” (Matthew 11:28).

On this point, one must not be too strict, for in personality development and identity formation there are persons and periods when portions of the identity of another must be borrowed, temporarily, until the younger and/or weaker individual's identity becomes sufficiently strong and coalesced for independent integrity and separation survival. Such identity borrowing is an example of healthy interpersonal dynamics and in professionally planned tentative borrowing, of which the teacher or analyst is totally aware of what is happening in the counseling or teaching arrangement. Moreover, this borrowing phenomenon in human developmental and counseling certainly deserves mention in this context, but, because of its importance, the subject matter merits an extended academic study and elaboration of its own.

In the long run, neither healthy parents nor sound liberal education teachers would want such a permanent and long-range extension of personality or identity on the part of offspring, patient or disciple. Emotionally healthy parents and teachers educate their children and disciples toward independence and freedom. The danger of morbid dependence edges toward reality when some learner—for reasons far too complicated to be completely explained here—goes looking for a trusted father image or an esteemed public figure, an authoritative image or a respected teacher to affirm, to reenforce, or to help integrate personal identity not yet acquired in the learner’s upbringing. In such an instance, a learner might immaturely and uncritically—generally unawares—comply with an admired teacher, with his ways and with his thinking in an effort to gain for the learner himself approval or a personal sense of security resulting from an identity borrowing. This temporary appropriation of identity will help consolidate more tightly the frail present structure of the learner’s identity. To accept what teachers say, simply because they say it, is not, in the long run, healthy, for there are too many dangers for a stunting of the learner’s intellectual and emotional growth—there is too much of a danger that such borrowing edge upon *poisonous pedagogy*.

Aristotle, as a disciple of Plato, learned much from his teacher; Aristotle loved and respected Plato as teacher and mentor. Yet, Plato so instructed Aristotle that the disciple was able to create an independent philosophical system different from that of his teacher and mentor. We will now depart from this very interesting subject leaving it to further study in education or psychology.

Liberal education, the total picture, Oratory Schools, God, goodness, and the virtuous life. Liberal education prepares students boldly to acknowledge error, but to consider this error within the total picture assessing everything in its proper order and perspective (Kernberg, 1976). This does not imply that everything should be considered in any balanced manner, because, at times, the issue discussed is not, in any way, balanced in itself, but either evil and heinous or good and heroic. For example, a well-educated liberal learner should be able to handle a controversial subject like radical feminism with determined accuracy of assessment, being neither overly impressed nor indignantly intimidated by the matter. Aware, historically, of the abuse of women's rights and ready to fight for the cause, the liberal learner, upon hearing that some feminists espouse the abandonment of Western civilization for its having been built upon the prejudices of white European males, would immediately recognize such an exaggerated posture as emotional foolishness. Faced with such unrestrained thinking, the liberal learner would respond with balanced thinking: “Liberal education is founded within Western civilization; that is a fact. We must consider the characteristics of our civilization. As a starting point, we are able to speak of liberal education within Western civilization; we are a civilization. The unmeasured criticism voiced about Western civilization is the problem; not Western civilization itself”.

Culture is part of a civilization, for a civilization can be made up of many cultures; that is, of the cultural components of civilization. Culture, then, is more intimately related to education than is civilization, for in education, cultural groups are, generally, prepared for the immediate world around them, and the school represents that world. Recognizing the close relationship of education and culture, especially between liberal education and culture, culture can be defined as consisting of our customs, everything we do—what we are wrapped in. Acknowledging that culture is transmitted through education, can place culture in a position of being education's food. Education considered in this way, has the capacity to both enhance and preserve culture.

The schools of the Pharr Oratory of St. Philip Neri School System (POSS) find themselves in a unique cultural situation, so much so that those who come to the Valley—as their region is called—comment culturally about the area as if they were in a different country. It is not solely because most people in the “Valley” speak Spanish, but that the ways of doing things, the culture, has become quite naturally something unique. The nature of the Rio Grande Valley and the attitude of Texas citizens toward the building of the border fence is expressed succinctly by David von Drehle, in a May 21, 2008, *Time U.S.* article titled *The Border Fence—A Texas Turf War*.

South Texans are happy with the soft barrier provided by nature—the Rio Grande—and enjoy a long history of easy commerce from one side of the border to the other and back again. In other words, Tex-Mex is more than a style of cooking down there—it's an entire culture, and what looks like a bright line on the map is actually an indefinite blend of one nation into another. (von Drehle, 2008,

para. 4)

Discussions by Texas Lower Rio Grande residents implicitly bespeak certain cultural realities: On both sides of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo River exists the same Western civilization; on each side of that river exists, at one and the same time, three cultures: One to the North, governmentally Texas American; one to the South, governmentally Tamaulipeca Mexican; and a third, bordering both banks of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo River. The region is culturally, economically, educationally, and religiously special.

As private Catholic schools, the Pharr Oratory of St. Philip Neri Schools are unique insofar as they are representative of the region linguistically, culturally, religiously and educationally, in that the Pharr Oratory School campus on the Mexican side (Reynosa, Tamaulipas) must comply with the regulations of the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP or *Secretaria de Educación Pública*) and the Pharr Oratory School campus on the Texas (Pharr, Texas) side must comply with norms of the Texas Catholic Conference Education Department.

With regard to ethical principles and values, you have to appeal to what religion gives you in order to be able to ground and be able to establish the principles you are imparting in a lay and secular forum. Without religion there is no justification or moral authority to demand certain attitudes and behaviors.

There is no dichotomy between education as philosophy and education as rhetoric or practice; both are important and necessary: Liberally educated learners must never cease to be obsessed with the truth; they must also be conscientiously aware of their moral obligation to contribute practically to the good of society. The student of liberal education should never allow their schooling to interfere with their education which should never be reduced to busy information, or to what John Henry Newman called, in his *The Idea of a University*, “viewiness” (p. viii). In Pharr Oratory schools, students are taught to develop the practice of seeing the total picture, the relationships, and the ultimate end. To assure this proper focus and perspective, time, leisure, and silence must be set apart for meditation, contemplation and prayer.

The virtuous life is the practical means for becoming fully human and for attaining to man's ultimate goal, God. Human beings advance as individuals by practicing the virtues which leads to excellence and happiness. For the Catholic, the end, or purpose, of virtue is God; *i.e.*, that for which the virtuous life is practiced. God, then, becomes the basis, or reason, of moral life. Everything is grounded in the Divine. Doctrine or dogma are the fundamental tenets by means of which a Catholic can know God. Religion, on the other hand, is virtue by means of which a Catholic can have a more intimate relationship with God. Classes in Catholic doctrine alone are not enough; to know what is virtuous does not make a Catholic virtuous. Teachers of virtue must show what virtue is in their own lives. Intellectually, the virtues can be explained, but only when virtues are modeled in the integrated life of another human being, does the admiration of that virtuous life enhanced by the grace of God become the actual wherewithal by means of which a learner becomes virtuous. For Catholics, the life of Jesus, the Son of God, is the principal model for the Christian life.

All true goodness comes from God and all virtuous people of good will participate in God's goodness. Socrates, the Jewish patriarchs, the noble men and women of other religions and philosophies can become models for an integrated virtuous life. God's love must be the foundation of human life; in this sense, to be fully *human* is synonymous with being *moral*; *i.e.*, loving our neighbor as Christ taught us. Happiness and peace are the consequence of a sincere attempt to live an integrated moral life. True liberal education learners are people of God (of Goodness), for they strive in life to know good and be good (virtuous). Those who deliberately put up obstacles to the pursuit of truth and goodness, are children of the lie (Beck, 1983). They are opposed to the people of God (goodness and truth). All goodness is grounded in the Divine. The methodology and tool for teaching virtue is the teacher's virtuous life.