

HAPPINESS,  
HOPE,  
*and* DESPAIR



*Rethinking the Role of Education*

PETER ROBERTS



## COMPLICATED

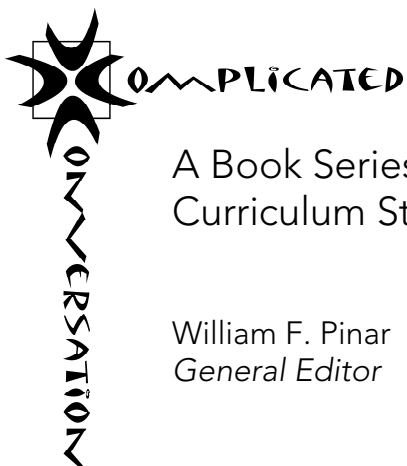
## CONVERSATION

In the Western world it is usually taken as given that we all want happiness, and our educational arrangements tacitly acknowledge this. *Happiness, Hope, and Despair* argues, however, that education has an important role to play in deepening our understanding of suffering and despair as well as happiness and joy. Education can be uncomfortable, unpredictable, and unsettling; it can lead to greater uncertainty and unhappiness. Drawing on the work of Søren Kierkegaard, Miguel de Unamuno, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Simone Weil, Paulo Freire, and others, Peter Roberts shows why these features of educational life need not be feared; to the contrary, they can be seen as a source of hope and human fulfillment.

After years of negotiating an education system dominated by the language of competition, performance, and economic advancement, students and teachers often long for something different; they seek not just measurable success but also opportunities to ask searching questions of themselves and the world they encounter. *Happiness, Hope, and Despair* makes an important contribution toward meeting this need. It fosters a rethinking of the nature, purpose, and value of education, and opens up possibilities for further scholarly and professional inquiry.

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HAPPINESS, HOPE,  
*and* DESPAIR



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William F. Pinar  
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# I n t r o d u c t i o n

## LIVING ON THE EDGE:

### Happiness, Hope, and Despair in Education

In the contemporary Western world, there is an obsession with “happiness.” Everyone, it seems, is expected to seek happiness and to avoid situations that might lead to unhappiness. As part of the wider process of marketization, happiness has become a commodity: something to be packaged, advertised, sold, and consumed. Educationists, while often critical of broader neoliberal social and economic trends, have for the most part accepted the importance of happiness in human life, and have typically espoused teaching and learning goals and objectives consistent with this view. Alternative terms have sometimes been employed to describe what is at stake in establishing desirable educational arrangements—reference might be made, for example, to having “high self-esteem,” achieving a sense of “well-being,” or developing a “positive outlook”—but the underlying assumptions in each case are frequently the same. It is taken as given that education should make us feel *better*, not worse, and that teachers have a responsibility to prepare students to become happy, well-integrated, contributing citizens in their lives beyond schools.

The idea that education might, at least in part, be concerned with promoting *unhappiness*—and perhaps even a certain kind of *despair*—is very much at odds with the spirit of our age. Of course, acknowledgment that some students are not happy is commonplace, and educationists have gone to considerable

lengths to understand the causes of such unhappiness and to respond positively to such situations. Where students are unhappy—and this may be in kindergartens, schools, or tertiary education institutions—we seek to address this as a “problem” with “solutions” that can range from changing subjects or classes, to acquiring new friends or interests, to counselling, and, increasingly, to drugs. Seldom will the ailment be identified precisely as “despair,” but where this is the case, it will usually be taken for granted that such a state must be avoided or overcome. Despair, where it is examined at all, will often be seen as the very antithesis of happiness, and education will be regarded as a means to lift us from this profound form of unhappiness and hopelessness to a more desirable state of mind. To say that one is being well educated yet existing in a state of despair would thus seem to be a contradiction in terms. The movement, as it is often depicted, should be *from* despair *to* hope—hope for a mode of being, or a set of psychological and behavioral attributes, or a social system where despair no longer figures prominently.

It is possible, however, to see happiness, hope, and despair in a somewhat different educational light, and this will be the task of the present volume. Concerns about depression and anxiety among young people have been expressed many times over recent years, both at academic conferences and in the popular media. Yet, few attempts have been made to analyze, from a philosophical standpoint, the root causes of such experiences. Moreover, the focus among educationists has often been on formal institutions, particularly at the school level, with little said about the broader process of lifelong learning. Additionally, there has been an excessive reliance on a limited range of scholarly resources—typically non-fiction research studies, and often of a quantitative kind—with scant attention to other texts and modes of human expression from which insight into the nature of unhappiness, despair, and anxiety can be gained. A good deal has been said about happiness and hope in education, but rather less has been said about despair. This book goes some way toward addressing these underdeveloped areas via a return to the work of thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Miguel de Unamuno, Simone Weil, and others who, collectively, have contributed much to our understanding of despair and its significance in the formation of human beings. (It is acknowledged that “unhappiness,” “depression,” “anxiety,” and “despair,” though often related to each other, are not equivalents. In the chapters that follow, some of the differences and points of overlap between these terms will become evident.)

I shall argue that despair need not be seen an aberrant state from which we should always seek to escape; rather, it can be a key element of a well-lived

human life. Education, I maintain, is meant to create a state of discomfort, and to this extent may also make us unhappy, but is all the more important for that. Indeed, the fact that we can experience such discomfort is a source of hope and possibility. To be educated is, in part, to be aware of the despair that is present in many lives, and to be open to examining and addressing this. We live in a world where happiness is marketed aggressively to those seeking a “cure” from depression or anxiety. We are, it seems, always trying to rid ourselves of such experiences: to dispense with them, or to solve them, or to flee from them. But not all forms of unhappiness or despair have, or need, a readily identifiable, quick-fix “solution.” This is not to “advocate” despair in any way; nor is it to suggest that well established systems for dealing with the difficulties people experience—therapy, group work, medication, and so on—will not continue to be important. There is no suggestion in this book that we should withdraw from the need to identify, analyze, resist, and transform conditions of oppression and marginalization; to the contrary, the chapters that follow make it plain that indifference to these forms of human experience would be abhorrent. It is not a matter of justifying or dismissing suffering, pain, and despair, but of attempting to understand these aspects of human existence more deeply and of learning from them. Experiences of unhappiness and despair, both individually and collectively, can teach, if we are willing to pay attention and respond creatively to them. Addressing despair in this way does not extinguish hope; it rekindles it and breathes fresh life into it.

The notion of “living on the edge” connects strongly with the risk-taking attitudes and behaviors exhibited by many young people today, and warrants careful exploration from an ethical and educational perspective. This metaphor allows us to consider, in a fresh light, what dwelling in marginal(ized) educative spaces might mean. This book focuses not so much on those who live physically on the edge as on the *inner* spaces often excluded from educational discourse. Forms of inner life that involve discomfort, pain, and unhappiness sometimes seem to be “no go” areas for serious inquiry, particularly if the idea is to probe them for their potential educative value. Despair is undeniably connected with social and economic circumstances but it is also experienced inwardly, often in a manner that has a profound bearing on what we seek to know and do and be. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, experiencing despair in this way need not be incompatible with also finding, expressing, and sharing great joy and fulfillment in life. Happiness and unhappiness, hope and despair, can co-exist, and the appreciation of any one these elements of human existence can be enhanced through understanding and experiencing another.

It is possible to speak of whole communities living in despair, with, for example, appalling housing conditions, grinding poverty, few prospects for work, and serious health problems. There is a substantial body of work concerned with despair in this sense, and continuing efforts to understand and address the desperate needs of such groups are much needed, both among researchers and in policy and practice. The margins explored in the present volume are, however, also worthy of further investigation. The principal figures who provide the theoretical and literary sustenance for the book were themselves all writers who lived “dangerously”—who “risked it all,” in an existential sense, for their philosophical and political commitments and their mode of life. Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Unamuno, Hesse, Weil, and Freire all had extraordinary lives, all experienced the pain of suffering, and all sought to integrate, in the most authentic way possible, their words with their deeds.

While much of the discussion that follows has a philosophical flavor, the ideas discussed in this book also have implications for policy and practice. After years of encountering a curriculum dominated by subjects regarded as “useful” and “measurable,” students and their teachers often long for something different—for encounters with “big ideas,” with questions and concerns that tap into their existential experience. The obsession in many Western countries with economic outcomes, competitiveness, and employability, has narrowed our sense of what matters most in education—and in life more generally. We have been led to believe that neoliberal, global capitalism provides the only reasonable basis for social organization in the contemporary world. The active exploration of alternatives—in the ways we structure our economic, social, and cultural activities, but also in how we view ourselves—has been discouraged. The need to turn our gaze back to the human beings at the heart of educational endeavors has arguably never been greater. This book is intended to play a small part in meeting this need, and the hope is that it will open up possibilities for further inquiry by other scholars and practitioners.

This is not a curriculum studies text in any conventional sense. The thinkers considered in this volume do, however, enable us to ponder fundamental questions that bear on curriculum theory and practice in new ways. Reflecting on the nature, meaning, and significance of our existence as human beings shapes the way we think about the purposes of education, and this in turn has an important bearing on curriculum content, structure, and processes. As an extensive body of scholarly work has demonstrated, in deciding what to teach, to whom, how, and why, we cannot avoid making ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political judgments (among many

other sources, see Apple, 1999, 2004; Beyer & Liston, 1996; Giroux, 1983; Greene, 1973; Haggerson, 2000; Malewski, 2010; Martin, 1985; Pinar, 2003, 2011, 2015; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995; Rasheed, 2007). My aim is not to put curriculum matters “front and center” in this volume but rather to add something “from the sidelines,” as it were, in a manner that might make a modest contribution to an on-going “complicated conversation” (Pinar, 2006, 2012).

Chapter 1 introduces the work of the idiosyncratic Danish thinker, Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s musings on despair have been highly influential, particularly for those who might, broadly speaking, be seen as part of the existentialist intellectual tradition. It is not possible in the space of one chapter to address the full range of Kierkegaardian texts relevant to the theme of despair. I concentrate on a key later work, *The Sickness Unto Death* (Kierkegaard, 1989). In *The Sickness Unto Death* Kierkegaard allows us to see that the capacity for despair is part of what makes us distinctively human. Despair, Kierkegaard suggests, may lie hidden beneath a veneer of happiness, beauty, and peacefulness, quietly making its presence felt even if it remains undetected in doing so. I draw on Kierkegaard’s ideas, without accepting all that he has to say, in arguing that despair does not always need to be seen as a problem that demands a solution. I maintain that education may enhance rather than reduce our sense of despair. This need not be seen as a reason for fearing, fleeing from, or abandoning education; to the contrary, it can help us to see why education is important and necessary.

The Spanish philosopher and novelist Miguel de Unamuno was a great admirer of Kierkegaard, and echoes of the Dane’s thought can be detected throughout Unamuno’s corpus of published writings. Unamuno, like Kierkegaard, wrestled throughout his life with doubt and despair. Underlying everything Unamuno wrote was his obsession with the question of immortality. This theme provides the flame around which all else circles in Unamuno’s major philosophical work, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations* (Unamuno, 1972). Unamuno wanted, desperately, to know whether there was life after death; he wanted to survive, not in the abstract, but as the flawed, fragile, distinctive individual being he felt himself to be. Chapter 2 picks up on the idea of doubt, first as a notion of significance in the history of Western philosophy, and then more specifically as it figures in the work of Unamuno. I argue that Unamuno remained uncertain throughout his life, not only in relation to matters of faith but also in his responses to other key philosophical and practical questions. This was in part a reflection of the fundamental tension he identifies

in his work between reason and logic on the one hand, and faith, feeling, and “life” on the other. Unamuno shows, however, that while doubt often goes hand in hand with despair, it can also be productive in our growth as educational beings.

The work of the French thinker Simone Weil, a kindred spirit in many respects with both Kiekegaard and Unamuno (cf. Allen, 1983; Madariaga, 1972; Tubbs, 2005a, 2005b), has exerted an important influence on scholars in a wide range of different fields. Philosophers, theologians, classicists, sociologists, and political scientists, among others, have all found something worthy of engagement in Weil’s varied writings, many of which only appeared after her death at the untimely age of 34. To date, however, Weil has attracted comparatively little interest from educationists. Chapter 3 discusses some of the key concepts in Weil’s philosophy and assesses their significance for the arts and humanities in higher education. Weil argues that just as in the physical world we are subject to the force of gravity, so too are we constantly pulled downwards in our existence as moral beings. We need, she says, to undergo a process of “decreation,” and this can involve great suffering. We must, she shows, sometimes teeter right on the edge of an existential abyss, experiencing the deep pain that is associated with staring into the void. Allowing grace to appear is a matter of cultivating our capacity for *attention* (Weil, 1997, 2001a). Weil’s work suggests that the development of attention ought to be considered a key aim of education. Weil maintains, moreover, that attention is also the one thing most needed by those who are afflicted. Although the main focus of this chapter is higher education, I try to show that Weil’s notion of attention has relevance for pedagogical and curriculum discussions at all levels of study.

Paulo Freire was one of the most influential educationists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Central to this Brazilian thinker’s philosophy of education is his theory of oppression and liberation, and within this, hope and despair are linked tightly together. For Freire, oppression and liberation are the concrete manifestations of dehumanization and humanization respectively. Humanization, the ontological and historical vocation of all human beings—a “universal human ethic,” as Freire (1998a) calls it in his later work—is the process of becoming more fully human through critical, dialogical praxis; dehumanization, a reality but not an inevitability, is the process through which this pursuit is impeded. Freire (1994) acknowledges the existence of despair, both in his own life and among the oppressed groups with whom he worked, but he always links this with a narrative of hope. For Freire, it is precisely when conditions seem most bleak that hope gains its meaning and significance. Realizing our

human capacity for hope, from a Freirean point of view, does not mean shying away from despair; instead, Freire suggests (based, in part, on his own experience), we must face up to it. Giving expression to hope demands a process of *struggle*. The principal struggle for Freire, when examining the realities of 20<sup>th</sup>-century life in Brazil, was the struggle against oppression. This is one of the defining features of liberation. But while necessary as a key part of an explanation of Freire's approach to liberation, the struggle against oppression is not sufficient. I argue that within Freire's theory of liberation, there is also a clear commitment to the development of certain virtues—and hope is one of them—that open up possibilities for what Andreola (2004) calls a “pedagogy of great convergences.”

It is not only philosophers and educational theorists who have something worthwhile to offer in pondering questions of happiness, despair, and education. Much can also be gained from literary sources. Chapter 5 examines the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, another figure, like Weil and Freire, whose influence has extended to multiple domains of inquiry. I focus on two texts in Dostoevsky's extensive corpus of published writings: the short novel, *Notes from Underground* (Dostoevsky, 2004), and a late story, “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man” (Dostoevsky, 1997). Together, these two works capture much of what gives Dostoevsky's fiction its literary power. In the figures of the Underground Man and the Ridiculous Man, we witness despair being experienced in the most vivid fashion imaginable. The Underground Man is spiteful and angry one moment, tender and vulnerable the next. Persecuted by his associates, he also encounters attentive, unselfish love of the kind described by Simone Weil in the relationship he builds with a prostitute, Liza. The Ridiculous Man feels there is so little point to his life, he should end it all. He fails in his intentions to commit suicide, but he succeeds in entering a dream world that proves revolutionary for him in an existential sense. In his dream, he travels to another far-away planet, spending in that dream state many years with a group of people who appear to live in total happiness and harmony with each other and with the world of nature. In keeping with the troubling, disruptive nature of much of Dostoevsky's fiction, we find in this story that there is no unequivocally happy ending: the Ridiculous Man “corrupts them all,” and the happiness and harmony that had prevailed among those in his dream world begin to break down. The degeneration is such that he is suddenly jolted awake, his sense of despair now coupled with hope: he has, in his dream, glimpsed a deeper truth behind our struggling and striving as human beings, and he now wishes to preach the message of neighborly love to all who

will listen. I outline and analyze these complex, multilayered fictional works in the light of Unamuno's ideas, building on the theoretical base laid down in Chapter 2. I argue that from both Dostoevsky's fiction and his own life, we can sharpen our understanding of ridiculousness (blurring traditional lines between "sanity" and "insanity") and acquire a keener sense of the potentially educative value of suffering.

In seeking to understand the connections between suffering, striving, and education, Hermann Hesse's classic literary account of a spiritual journey in his book *Siddhartha* (Hesse, 2000a) is particularly helpful. This seemingly simple tale, the focus for discussion in Chapter 6, is considerably more nuanced than initial appearances suggest, and there is much to be gained from multiple readings of the book. Hesse himself was a restless soul, particularly for the first half of his life, and this restlessness is mirrored in the fictional life of Siddhartha. Siddhartha encounters, observes, and experiments with a range of different modes of existence: asceticism, Buddhism, the art of lovemaking, the world of business, and the role of ferryman. As a young man he has questions that demand answers, and for much of his life he suffers greatly in trying to respond to his inner promptings. As he grows into middle age, he reaches the depths of despair, feeling absolute disgust with himself and the trappings of worldly life. For Siddhartha, pain is intermingled with pleasure. Siddhartha finally attains a more peaceful state of mind with his return to the river where he had first met a ferryman, Vasudeva, and he learns much from watching and working with this quiet teacher. Drawing on the philosophy of Simone Weil (and with reference also to an ancient idea from the work of Aeschylus), I analyze Siddhartha's educational journey as the gradual development of his capacity for attention. Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* allows us to better appreciate the role both pain and pleasure have to play in our growth as educational beings.

The final chapter returns to the question of happiness. I comment on the rise of what might be called a "happiness industry" over recent years. The emergence of new discourses on happiness is consistent with several other trends in economic and social policy, within educational circles, and in popular media. Happiness, I argue, has become a commodity, to be marketed to eager consumers. Claims about a new "science" of happiness help to boost the sale of happiness "products," and cultures of competition and performativity ensure that those who purchase those products keep coming back for more. The obsession with happiness dovetails nicely with the emphasis on positive, optimistic thinking. The contemporary world of capitalist consumerism is one

in which pessimism, as a stance toward the world and as a philosophical tradition with a long history, is frequently and unreflectively dismissed. Building on the work undertaken in previous chapters, I suggest that taking unhappiness and despair seriously need not mean the abandonment of happiness nor the loss of a sense of value and purpose in life. I revisit the work of Dostoevsky and other key figures considered in this book in exploring the relations between happiness, despair, and education. Deepening our understanding of despair through education is, I suggest, not something that should be feared; to the contrary, such an enterprise can serve as the basis for a new ethic of hope. This area of inquiry is ripe with possibilities for further philosophical, pedagogical, and curriculum exploration.



## EDUCATION, FAITH, AND DESPAIR:

### Wrestling with Kierkegaard

What is despair? Most of us acknowledge that despair exists, but seldom pause to examine it closely. When we do give some thought to this difficult subject, we usually take it for granted that despair is an entirely negative state of mind or mode of being—something we would want to avoid or seek to overcome. Education, more often than not, is seen as a means for lifting people out of despair. Education offers hope, and hope is seen as the antithesis of despair. This chapter calls these apparently self-evident views into question. I begin with Kierkegaard’s influential account of despair in his late work, *The Sickness Unto Death* (Kierkegaard, 1989). Kierkegaard is helpful in allowing us to see that our capacity for despair is a distinguishing feature of human life. He shows that despair may be present even where happiness, serenity, and beauty seem to prevail. Kierkegaard’s faith-based answer to the question of despair is, however, not without its difficulties. I argue (i) that despair need not always be seen as a problem that requires, or lends itself to, a “solution” (of a faith-based kind or of any other kind); (ii) that education, far from diminishing our sense of despair, may heighten it; and (iii) that this provides not a reason for abandoning education but rather a basis for committing to it more strongly than ever.

## Kierkegaard on Despair

Written under the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, *The Sickness Unto Death* was published in 1849. It is arguably Kierkegaard's "most polished and mature work" (Marino, 2004, p. 5). Kierkegaard had considered the nature of despair in *Either/Or* (Kierkegaard, 1987) and other earlier books but *The Sickness Unto Death* provides arguably his most nuanced and important treatment of this central existentialist theme. (On Kierkegaard's place in the existentialist tradition, see Barrett, 1990; Cooper, 1999; Flynn, 2009; Kaufmann, 1975; Marino, 2004.) Kierkegaard identifies three forms of despair: "being unconscious in despair of having a self (inauthentic despair), not wanting in despair to be oneself, and wanting in despair to be oneself" (Kierkegaard, 1989, p. 43). His account rests on a conception of the human being as a spiritual self, where the self is "a relation which relates to itself" (p. 43). A human being, Kierkegaard maintains, "is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity" (p. 43). Despair is an imbalance in the relation that is the self and this cannot be addressed by an effort of will alone, for the harder one works at removing despair the more deeply one becomes conscious of it and immersed within it (pp. 44–45). Kierkegaard argues that all human beings are in despair, whether they see themselves in this light or not (pp. 52–53). Even those who appear most peaceful, joyous, and harmonious are nonetheless in despair (p. 55). Underlying all good fortune, all that is beautiful, is a sense of dread from which no human being can escape (see Kierkegaard, 1980).

Asking himself whether despair is a merit or a defect, Kierkegaard answers by saying that in purely abstract terms it is unquestionably a merit. The possibility of despair is what distinguishes human beings from all other living creatures, and those who are aware of their despair have an advantage over those who do not. Yet, the actual experience of despair can bring great misfortune and misery, even ruin (Kierkegaard, 1989, pp. 44–45). With despair, then, we witness a reversal of the usual relation between possibility and actuality. Generally, if it is considered meritorious to be able to be something, actually being that is all the more meritorious. In the case of despair, this is, in one sense at least, not so: in the possibility of despair one ascends, while in the actuality of despair one descends.

From a Kierkegaardian perspective, despair should not be seen as something that happens to a person—as a fate over which we have no control. It is true that we all suffer despair but this is precisely the point: we as concrete individuals must face despair and take responsibility for this; we cannot "excuse" ourselves

by appealing to destiny or the will of God. For the Christian Kierkegaard, the same God who creates in human beings the relation that is the self also, as it were, “lets go of it” (p. 46). (This idea bears some resemblance to Simone Weil’s notion of an absent God: see Weil, 1997.) Despair comes from that which is eternal in a person and thus cannot be pushed away. With despair, as lived, “the time is constantly the present; . . . at every moment of actual despair the despairer bears with him all that has gone before as something present in the form of possibility” (Kierkegaard, 1989, p. 47). The torment of despair lies in the inability to die. Just as, in living as human beings, we cannot kill our thoughts, so too is it impossible for the despairer to die. The self, in despair, wants to consume itself but cannot do so (pp. 48–49). We think we despair over *something*—over difficulties, failures, injustices, pain—but what we really despair over is ourselves.

The despair over ourselves, Kierkegaard contends, is the basis for all despair. The second form of despair—wanting, in despair, to be oneself—is not, as it would seem, the opposite of the first form but an affirmation of it. For “[t]he self which, in his despair, he wants to be is a self he is not (indeed, to want to be the self he truly is, is the very opposite of despair); that is, he wants to tear his self away from the power which established it. But despite all his despair, this he is incapable of doing” (p. 50). The title of Kierkegaard’s book comes from the New Testament story of Lazarus being raised by Christ from the dead, his sickness thereby no longer being “unto death.” Kierkegaard’s focus is on a sickness of the spirit, the origins of which, he believes, lie in the denial of Christ. For Kierkegaard, it is not the awakening of Lazarus from the dead that allows us to say his sickness is not unto death. Rather, this comes from the very existence of Christ: from the possibility of eternal life. By rejecting Christ and accepting death as the end, we live as beings constantly “unto death.”

Despair, Kierkegaard argues, is only possible because there is something eternal in us as human beings. The existence of the eternal in the individual can be proven, Kierkegaard believes, by the fact that despair cannot consume the self. If this were to be possible, it would not really have been despair in the first place. The despairer is “mortally ill” but cannot die, for “[d]eath is not the end of the sickness, but death is incessantly the end” (p. 51). This is a sickness unto death because, in being unable to die, death must be lived constantly. Kierkegaard summarises his position thus:

That is the condition of despair. However much it eludes the despairer, however much (as must be especially the case with the kind of despair which is ignorance of being in despair) the despairer has succeeded in losing his self, and in such a way that

the loss is not in the least way noticeable, eternity will nevertheless make it evident that his condition is that of despair, and will nail him to his self so that the torment will still be that he cannot be rid of his self, and it will be evident that his success was an illusion. And this eternity must do, because having a self, being a self, is the greatest, the infinite, concession that has been made to man, but also eternity's claim on him. (p. 51)

Despair, for Kierkegaard, is analogous to physical sickness: just as there is no human being who enjoys perfect health, so too is there no individual who does not experience at least some despair. If we peer deeply into our innermost being, we will find “an uneasiness, an unquiet, a discordance, an anxiety in the face of an unknown something”—a something we may only perceive and comprehend in glimpses, and seldom confront (p. 52). Kierkegaard insists that bearing witness to this reality is not discouraging but uplifting. To not be conscious of despair, Kierkegaard argues, is itself a form of despair (p. 53). Facing up to this most difficult of human experiences can allow us to “shed light on what one generally banishes to a certain obscurity” (p. 52). It is not easy, however, to understand our own despair. Patients with physical ailments may misdiagnose themselves; the same is true of those who declare themselves to either be or not be in despair. What is needed, Kierkegaard seems to imply, is a more *educated* assessment of our own condition. But more on this later.

Kierkegaard determines that the decisive element in understanding despair is consciousness and in particular *self*-consciousness. Self-consciousness is related to the *will*: “Someone who has no will at all is no self. But the more will he has, the more self-consciousness he has too” (p. 59). A self, Kierkegaard maintains, is always in a process of becoming, for the self “is not present actually, it is merely what is to come into existence” (p. 60). The self, being perpetually in a state of becoming, does not become itself (in any fixed, final sense); but to not be oneself is also a form of despair (p. 60). Kierkegaard's position here rests on a particular account of the self we can and should become: a *spirit* self. He speaks of those who are outwardly successful, seeking and gaining wealth and honour, and perhaps securing themselves a place in the history books, as having, in a spiritual sense, *no self*—“no self for whose sake they could venture everything, no self for God” (p. 65). To become a self, both possibility and necessity are essential. Becoming a self is a matter of necessity to the extent that we can only become what we are, but becoming is itself the realisation of possibility. As Kierkegaard points out, becoming suggests movement from some place, yet in becoming oneself the movement is at that place

(p. 66). For Kierkegaard, necessity is not, as philosophers would traditionally have it, a unity of possibility and actuality; rather, “actuality is the unity of possibility and necessity” (p. 66). What is missing, Kierkegaard says, is “the strength to obey, to yield to the necessary in one’s self, what might be called one’s limits” (pp. 66–67). This brings Kierkegaard to the crux of the matter:

The decisive thing is: for God everything is possible. This is eternally true and therefore true every moment. People no doubt say this in the ordinary way of things, and this is how one ordinarily puts it, but the decisive moment only comes when man is brought to the utmost extremity, where in human terms there is no possibility. Then the question is whether he will believe that for God everything is possible, that is, whether he will *have faith*. But this is simply the formula for losing one’s mind; to have faith is precisely to lose one’s mind so as to win God. (p. 68)

Faced with the most horrifying reality imaginable, the despair that is within us fights for its release—for the consent of our whole being that will allow it to be. It is at such moments, when we are at our most desperate, that the possibility of salvation comes into sharpest focus. Humanly, salvation is impossible, but for God everything is possible, at all times. In faith, in possibility, the believer possesses an “ever-sure antidote to despair” (p. 70; see also Kierkegaard, 2005).

## Educational Despair?

At first glance, we seem to face an immediate problem when responding to Kierkegaard’s account of despair. In evaluating the strength and coherence of his argument, much appears to hinge on whether we share his belief in God. If one is an atheist or an agnostic, does this mean everything else Kierkegaard has to say about despair must be disregarded? I think not. It is true that Kierkegaard cannot be understood adequately without reference to his declarations on God and faith. To attempt to isolate other dimensions of his thought from his Christian worldview (by no means the orthodox Christianity of his time, it must be added) is to risk decontextualizing and distorting his ideas. But it does not follow from this that his account of despair is wholly dependent upon that worldview for its intelligibility and potential relevance to other domains of inquiry. Parallels can be drawn between despair as it is explained in *The Sickness Unto Death* and despair as it is experienced in education, irrespective of whether one believes in God. Whether one answers

“yes,” “no,” or “I don’t know” to the question of God’s existence, and whatever one thinks of the role of faith in “overcoming” despair, the educationist has an interest in understanding the conscious, inquiring human being who can ask such questions in the first place. Kierkegaard prompts us to reflect on these questions, even if we start from different assumptions in addressing them and find different answers to them (cf. Hill, 1966).

It should be noted, moreover, that the views conveyed in *The Sickness Unto Death* are not those of Søren Kierkegaard but those of Anti-Climacus. Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms is a crucial element of his authorship and this can have an important bearing on how we read and respond to his work (see further, McPherson, 2001; Saeverot, 2011). We know from Kierkegaard’s journal that on the question of Christian belief, he regarded himself as falling somewhere between Johannes Climacus (the pseudonymous author of *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: Kierkegaard, 1985, 2009), who “places himself so low that he even admits to not being a Christian,” and Anti-Climacus, who “gives the impression of taking himself to be a Christian to an extraordinary degree” (Hannay, 1989, p. 15). This helps to explain why, in the second part of *The Sickness Unto Death*, despair is depicted as a “sin.” For Anti-Climacus, the existence of God is beyond question, and to reject the Christian doctrine of sin and forgiveness is the greatest sin of all (p. 14). Anti-Climacus has no room for doubt, but Kierkegaard himself, while sharing some of his pseudonymous counterpart’s views, is, as Paulo Freire (1997a, 1998a, 1998b) would put it, less certain of his certainties. And herein lies a clue to understanding the connection between education and despair as this is depicted in *The Sickness Unto Death*.

Education promotes not greater certainty but greater doubt—and with doubt can come despair. Education, it is often believed, is a process through which we subject our ideas to critical scrutiny. In becoming educated, it is expected that we will come to question much that was hitherto taken for granted, such that we will never be the same again. Education renders the world problematic; it treats not only the objects to be known but knowers themselves as subjects for investigation. This is, at any rate, part of what we hold up as an educational *ideal*: education is *meant* to encourage us to think, to probe, to reflect. It is widely acknowledged, of course, that it often falls well short of this ideal. The language used to describe the shortcomings of education in this regard will vary depending on the theoretical framework within which a critic is working. What passes as “education” may indoctrinate, or subject people to the dominant ideology, or more deeply immerse them in

sexist, racist, homophobic, anthropocentric, or colonizing discourses. Implied by all such critiques, however, is the counter view that education has something more to offer: education can and should promote doubt and questioning of some kind, and to that extent unsettle, disturb, or disrupt the status quo.

We seldom pause to consider some of the broader ontological and ethical implications of our underlying commitment to education conceived in these “critical” terms. If education succeeds in promoting doubt, questioning and critique, what impact will this have on those who are educated? (Helpful in this regard is Boler, 2004.) Kierkegaard helps us to answer this question, not only in *The Sickness Unto Death* (to which I shall return shortly), but in an earlier work, the incomplete *Philosophical Fragments* (Kierkegaard, 1985). In *Philosophical Fragments* Kierkegaard’s plan was for Johannes Climacus, as an earnest young man, to do exactly as philosophers exhort us to do, and doubt everything. In so doing, he would suffer greatly, become cunning, and “almost” acquire a bad conscience. He would go as far in that direction as he could go, find himself profoundly unhappy, and want to return to his previous state of mind. To his horror, he would find that he is unable to go back. He would despair, his youth having been wasted in his deliberations. Life, he would find, had not acquired any meaning for him, and all this would be the fault of philosophy (pp. 234–235).

Kierkegaard’s intention in *Philosophical Fragments* was to “strike a blow” at modern speculative philosophy (p. 234), but in this respect he was only partially successful. For while he recognized that Johannes Climacus’s attempt to question everything would inevitably lead to unhappiness and despair, he could not stop himself from exhibiting many of the characteristics of the doubter. The ground on which his inquiry proceeded was one of doubt. (For two educational perspectives on the question of doubt in Kierkegaard’s work, see Tubbs, 2005a; Wivestad, 2011.) As observed in the *Fragments*, philosophy begins with doubt; in order to philosophize at all, one must have already doubted (see Kierkegaard, 1985, pp. 133–159). Kierkegaard as author had doubts and expressed these through his work; in this particular work, he expressed *doubts about doubt*. In one sense this was a tacit endorsement of the very tendencies he was seeking to undermine. At the same time, however, it was an affirmation of the views he conveyed, for Kierkegaard, in his own experience of despair, saw himself as living proof of what can come from incessant doubting.

Education is an inherently *risky* process. In fact, we might go further than this and say that if we take the task of education seriously, we place everything

that matters to us at risk; we *risk it all* every time we encounter something new through teaching and/or learning. Lest this seem a trifle dramatic, imagine a situation where no questioning, no doubting, no reassessment of older views, would be permitted: where such forms of cognitive activity were literally inconceivable and impossible. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to know what would be left that would constitute us as human beings. Kierkegaard saw, as did his great admirer Miguel de Unamuno (1972), that our capacity for reflective thought is both a defining feature of being human and the basis for our despair. Education is concerned precisely with the development of this human attribute—our ability to reason, to think things through, to wonder how and why, to ask questions and pose challenges. Of course, there is more to education than this, and if we shift our focus slightly to examine the ideal of the educated person, we will often find reference to other features that have to do with (for example) breadth and depth of understanding, creativity, care and compassion, a sense of responsibility and commitment, civic mindedness, and so on. But these other attributes often presuppose, rely upon, and complement rather than contradict, the capacity for reflective thought.

What is the “it” that is at risk when we submit ourselves to the process of education? It is, as Kierkegaard recognized, *ourselves*. For Kierkegaard, the self is spiritual in nature, but even if we cannot abide by this view, the point still holds. As human beings we are constantly in a process of remaking ourselves, and education not only prompts that process but reminds us of how and why this is so. Education places us in the same position of existential anxiety—it might be called despair or even terror—faced by Kierkegaard’s perpetually doubting Johannes Climacus: once we commit to it, *we can never go back*. We cannot reclaim the self we once were; we must live with what we become, and we can never know exactly what that will be. If we have learned something significant, something that is unlikely to simply be forgotten, we cannot “unlearn” this (unless, perhaps, we are subjected to “brainwashing” or “re-programming”). If our conscience has been pricked, if we have been made aware through teaching, formal or informal, of something that disturbs us and reshapes our ethical views, we cannot simply dismiss these troubling thoughts. While memories may fade with time, and will always be selective, the general orientation of education is to *not let us forget*. Education thus makes us live in a constantly recreated present, where neither the world to be known nor the knower can ever quite be pinned down, but it also demands of us that we carry the past into that present.

Our despair resides, then, in the imprisonment we face as hostages to our own memories, our own heightened awareness of injustices that were hitherto

obscured for us, our own minds full of accumulated knowledge. Needless to say, there is also much that we learn that is thoroughly pleasant, inspiring, helpful, and desirable. Through education, we can acquire skills of tremendous value in our professional and recreational lives; we can experience the joys of reading and writing; we can come to better appreciate the beauty of nature; we can open up the vast world of science; we can become aware of other countries, other cultures, earlier times, and possible futures. But educational experiences, if conceived in the manner articulated above, cannot be carved into neat piles, each cleanly separable from the others; nor can they be placed on a kind of balance sheet with a view to determining whether the “positives” outweigh the “negatives” (or vice versa). We despair not because we have *more* “negatives” but because those memories, those thoughts and feelings, that make us suffer *matter*.

As Kierkegaard argued, the more conscious we become of certain things, the greater our despair. It is not that we are all on a steady upward path of learning deeper and deeper truths as we go through life; educational journeys are, I would venture to suggest, usually much more uneven than that. But as we grow older, we frequently find ourselves becoming not more relaxed, more settled, more certain, but more restless and less certain than ever. The world is, we learn, more complex than we hitherto could have imagined—and we find ourselves, despite our education, no better equipped to address its problems, or our own, than we were prior to learning what we know now. We cannot push that which is painful aside any more than we can split our bodies apart and separate one portion from the other. As Schopenhauer observed, attempting to rid ourselves of suffering simply results in a change in its form; if we achieve temporary relief in one quarter, the pain will reappear in any one of a thousand other possible ways (Schopenhauer, 1969a, p. 315). We must carry the burden of suffering with us wherever we go, often not so much as a cloak that covers us but as a gnawing sensation that will not leave us alone, will not allow us to quite break free. Despair, seen in this light, is not something dramatic created as a kind of sudden, traumatic shock to our body or being; rather, it is a quieter but more persistent discomfort, a sense, as Kierkegaard put it, of perpetual unease (see further, Kierkegaard, 1980; Kosch, 2006; McKnight, 2004, 2010; Nielsen, 2006).

Kierkegaard, like Dostoevsky (1991, 1994, 2004) and Unamuno (1972), realized that reason cannot come to our rescue in addressing the forms of suffering that afflict us most deeply. We cannot *think our way out* of a state of despair; when we try to, we often end up digging ourselves deeper into the

existential hole that has trapped us. Nor can we turn to “positive” emotions as a kind of quick-fix, though many a self-help guru would try to convince us otherwise; in such cases, we merely mask the other thoughts and feelings that have given rise to our cry for help. Kierkegaard’s point about the torment of being unable to destroy the self that despairs is apt here. We cannot think, feel, or will ourselves out of existence. This, however, also suggests a problem with Kierkegaard’s position. Kierkegaard advances the idea that we must *choose* the path we follow. In *Either/Or* (Kierkegaard, 1987) and *Stages on Life’s Way* (Kierkegaard, 1988) he delineates three possible modes of life: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious (see also Golomb, 1992; Kierkegaard, 1998). The last of these is, ontologically speaking, the highest—a point reinforced in *The Sickness Unto Death* with its strong claims about the need for faith. Yet, there is something that does not ring true here. It is not difficult to see Kierkegaard’s call for faith, for all the words expended on it, as a form of wishful thinking (see Hannay, 1989). Arguably we cannot “think our way into” faith, or will ourselves to believe, any more than we can think our way out of despair or simply will our suffering away. Kierkegaard, along with most others who discuss despair, still sees it as something that can be and needs to be “cured”—this, as Camus points out in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, was his “frenzied wish” (Camus, 1991, p. 38). The Kierkegaardian “solution” is a faith-based one; others seek alternative remedies in therapy, hedonistic lifestyles, meditation, social reconstruction, and so on. (This does not mean that Kierkegaard abandoned reason altogether: see Evans, 2008; Berthold-Bond, 1998.)

Perhaps, however, such attempts to overcome despair are themselves manifestations of the symptoms for which a cure is sought. Kierkegaard remained a reflective, doubting, despairing human being even as he, or rather Anti-Climacus, argued most passionately for the need to “obey,” to accept the path of faith. The very fact that Kierkegaard poured his heart and soul into his work, mustering all his analytical abilities to demonstrate the need for faith, was itself an indication of his desperation, his inability to truly believe the doctrine he, through his pseudonyms, was advancing. “Acceptance” can, however, take another form. We can come to accept that in some senses, despair will always be with us—both as individuals, shaping our own distinctive lives, and collectively as a human race. The weight of historical evidence is on our side in making such a claim; equally evident, however, is our persistent hope that it might be otherwise. Acceptance as it is understood here does not mean we should do nothing in the face of suffering; it simply admits that not all forms or specific instances of suffering can be overcome. Acceptance in

this context also means accepting that we will struggle against despair, even if our efforts to overcome it prove fruitless; the process of struggle is itself part of what defines us as human beings.

This allows us to rethink the nature and role of education. Education, in developing further our human capacity for critical, reflective, reasoning thought, does not diminish our sense of despair; to the contrary, it enhances it. But if we can come to accept this, education also allows us to *work with* our despair in new ways. Education can assist us in understanding the despair we experience, allowing us to identify, consider, and discuss its different forms. It can also heighten our sensitivity toward others as fellow sufferers. Kierkegaard's notion of "choosing" the path of faith may be less than convincing but this does not stop us from holding on to a notion of *commitment*. Educational commitment based on hope is not the same as educational commitment based on faith (see Arcilla, 1992). Faith is not enough on its own to sustain educational development. Indeed, faith can be *anti-educational*. We can commit to something—an idea, a set of ethical principles, a cause, a person or group of people, or a way of life—in the face of uncertainty, admitting to our doubts and fears. Commitment does not overcome despair; it responds to it and in this respect addresses it. We can address a problem without having to "solve" it, recognizing that through the act of addressing the problem, it may be transformed, creating further problems to be addressed. This process is, for anyone committed to education, continuous and lifelong. There is never a point in an educational life where we can, in good conscience, say we have "made it" and can now relax in the knowledge that all essential problems have been solved, all key questions answered. The "leap of faith" we take in education need not be of a religious kind; it can relate more to the idea of *going on* as teachers and learners, despite uncertainty, despair, and the possibility of repeated failure (cf. Burbules, 1997).

Working with despair in the manner hinted at here need not be depressing or joyless. (The same point can be made, in a more general way, in relation to the whole tradition of pessimistic thought: see Dienstag, 2006.) To the contrary, as Camus recognized, in order to genuinely love life, we must also be able to despair of life (Camus, 1968, p. 56). Acknowledging, examining, and addressing despair in its different manifestations, in our own life and the lives of others, can allow us to more deeply appreciate the joy in small things. It can liberate us from the need to seek constant "doses" of commodified happiness, often marketed to us as a necessary tonic in an otherwise unbearable world. Education can expose the ugliness of the world and alert us to our

own brutalities and other shortcomings, but this can also have the effect of prompting us to examine how it could be otherwise. Despair and joy may be in tension with each other but that does not mean they are polar opposites. They are intertwined, with our experience and understanding of one dependent upon what we know of the other. Similarly, while despair is commonly construed as a state or condition “without hope,” it can also be seen as the foundation on which we give substance and meaning to hope. For it is precisely when all appears lost, when a situation is most desperate, that hope gains renewed significance. When all is well, we do not *need* hope; when we are at our lowest ebb, we can become more sharply aware than ever of the need to create and build hope. Hope then becomes not a matter of idle speculation but a form of reflective, focused action.

## Conclusion

The heading for the previous section of this chapter is deliberately ambiguous. Education, I have argued, heightens our sense of despair. There is also a sense, however, in which despair can be educational. Given our distinctively human capacity for reflective thought, we cannot avoid despair; there is no “cure” for it. But we can learn from it (see further, Chen, 2011). We must learn to live with despair, without in any way endorsing it or promoting it. Kierkegaard is right, in my view, that we despair over both wanting and not wanting to be ourselves. We do not have to accept a theistic conception of the self for this point to remain true or for it to have educational significance. Education is, in part, about learning to better understand and live with ourselves as despairing beings. Education allows us to address the condition of despair, while also accepting that this will often be a provisional, uncertain, risky process. Once committed to education, there is no going back. Education makes our lives not easier but more complex, more difficult, than ever before. It does so, however, in a manner that permits us to experience not only despair but joy, and to better appreciate just how tightly entwined those two forms of human experience will always be.

## DOUBT, DISCOMFORT, AND IMMORTALITY:

Educational Possibilities in the Work of  
Miguel de Unamuno

Philosophy begins with doubt: this, as was noted in the previous chapter, is the central proposition explored in Søren Kierkegaard's posthumously published *Philosophical Fragments* (Kierkegaard, 1985). Through his pseudonym Johannes Climacus, Kierkegaard set out to consider the potentially destructive power of doubting in (modern) philosophy. His plan, as enunciated in the supplementary materials included with the book, was that Climacus would doubt everything, suffer greatly in doing so, and, to his horror, find he is unable to return to his pre-doubting self. Life would lose its meaning for him, and he would fall into despair (pp. 234–235). The narrative that unfolds is more complex than this description suggests, but Kierkegaard remains true to his underlying idea: the principle of doubt, as interpreted, investigated, and enacted by Climacus, appears to be debilitating rather than enabling. Climacus's experience is illustrative of the connection between doubt as an epistemological matter on the one hand, and doubt as an ontological and ethical matter on the other. This connection has important educational implications.

Doubt and despair have continued to feature as thematically linked concerns in Western thought following Kierkegaard. Those who have addressed these notions have often also considered, explicitly or implicitly, other questions such as these: Why are we here? How do we give our lives a sense of

purpose and significance? What does it mean to exist as a human being? Does God exist? Is there life after death? If there is no God, is everything permitted? What ethical principles, if any, should guide our lives? What are our obligations to others? How do we come to understand ourselves and the world? One thinker who grappled with a number of these questions, and gave them a special sense of existential urgency, was the Spanish philosopher and novelist, Miguel de Unamuno. For Unamuno (1972), doubt and despair were central elements of what he referred to as the “tragic sense of life.” Our lives are tragic because we are beings endowed with both a longing for an immortality and the capacity to question such desires. Unamuno made it clear, however, that doubt need not be destructive; indeed, it is through uncertainty that hope arises and is given substance and significance. Seeing this more “positive” side to doubt in Unamuno’s writings is, however, no easy matter; Unamuno makes us *work* to find this, and in this sense his task is pedagogical in nature. To understand Unamuno’s position, it is helpful to have some idea of where he sits in the broader Western history of doubt as a philosophical orientation. This will be the focus of the first part of the chapter. The second part sketches some of Unamuno’s key ideas and explores their educational ramifications. Prompted by Unamuno, I argue that doubt, contrary to Johannes Climacus’s experience, can be seen in a constructive light as a pivotal element in any meaningful, worthwhile educational life.

## Doubt in Western Philosophy

Doubt has served as a fundamental principle underlying philosophical investigation in the West from the time of the ancient Greeks, as exhibited by the intellectual strategies of probing, questioning, challenging, and debating. Socratic conversation, to which we still pay homage in our educational, parliamentary, and legal institutions, rests on the assumption that if knowledge is to advance, we must be prepared to subject our perceptions, opinions, and ideas to rigorous scrutiny. This is the form of philosophical exploration undertaken by Plato in dialogues such as *The Republic* (Plato, 1974). In seeking knowledge, we must come to appreciate what we do *not* know, and the trigger in starting that process is invariably the planting of a seed of doubt. In Plato’s dialogues, it was typically Socrates who assumed the role of questioner, probing persistently until views that had hitherto been taken for granted by his interlocutors were (ostensibly) left in tatters. At the same time, Plato also

attempted to illustrate, most famously in the *Meno* (Plato, 1949), that if the right questions are asked, we may discover—recollect, as Plato would see it—knowledge we did not know we had.

Modern Western philosophy is often said to have started with Descartes, and Descartes begins with doubt. In his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes declares that he will “reject as absolutely false” everything he could imagine might have any ground for doubt, to see if anything would remain that was “entirely certain” (Descartes, 1911, p. 101). This is the basis for his methodological skepticism, a form a philosophical inquiry still influential today. Descartes acknowledges that we can be deceived by our senses and fall prey to paralogisms in our reasoning. He resolves to treat everything that enters his mind as no more true than the illusions we construct in our dreams. “But immediately afterwards,” he says, “I noticed that whilst I thus wished to think all things false, it was absolutely essential that the ‘I’ who thought this should be somewhat, and remarking that this truth ‘*I think, therefore I am*’ was so certain and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions brought forward by sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I came to the conclusion that I could receive it without scruple as the first principle of the Philosophy for which I was seeking” (p. 101).

Across the centuries, Descartes’ one apparent certainty has, of course, become rather less certain and there is now a substantial and complex body of scholarly work that calls his philosophical starting point into question. Some raise doubts about the “I” element in the famous “*I think, therefore I am*” dictum (suggesting, for example, that it might more properly be conceived as “we”); others focus on the thinking part and argue that in seeking to understand ourselves and the world, we might just as well say “*I feel, therefore I am*” (see Roberts, 2000). Doubt prompted Descartes, but if he hoped to find a safe haven in one proposition that could be free from such doubting, the history of Western philosophy would suggest he was mistaken. Descartes has not freed philosophers from doubt; instead, he has played his part in creating further doubt.

On the face of it, it is perfectly possible to live with few or no doubts. We can point to those who appear so certain in their political, religious or lifestyle convictions that they either cannot or will not consider alternative views. Apparent certainty in belief may arise from faith, or from “brainwashing,” or from an inability to reflect on what one holds to be true. Proclamations of the kind “There can be little doubt ...” carry with them a tacit sense of epistemological superiority, as if it can be taken for granted that “knowing” is

always and necessarily better than “not knowing” or “not being certain that one knows.” There is often a quality of excessive certainty evident in such examples that many philosophers and educationists find troubling. Paulo Freire (1994, 1997a) regarded such cases of being too certain of one’s certainties as dogmatism, and noted that this could be present among those on both the Left and the Right of the political spectrum. Ironically, a tendency toward excessive certainty of one kind—intellectual smugness—is not altogether unusual among those who profess to be sceptics. Skepticism, supposedly founded on doubt, can be brandished rather unreflectively as a kind of weapon, often involving a belittling of others: a sniggering attitude that betrays an underlying arrogance about the rightness of one’s own position.

But what might we mean when we use terms such as “doubt” and “certainty”? It is not always clear where one ends and the other begins. Doubt suggests some kind of questioning, and certainty implies some form of acceptance that is beyond questioning. But these thoughts invite questions of their own: What is being questioned (or not questioned)? By whom? Toward what end? If we take seriously the insights afforded by a variety of critical traditions of educational scholarship—Marxist, psychoanalytic, post-structuralist, and postmodern, among others—it should be evident that the answers to such questions are seldom as straightforward as we would like to believe. If, as an expression of doubt, “I” question, it is a matter for debate as to what constitutes the “I.” From a number of different critical perspectives, it can be argued that we are not the authors of our own intentions. We might probe further and ask whether doubt is best understood as an *experience* of questioning or as an *expression* of questioning. Indeed, expressing doubt through questioning can often lead to greater certainty of a kind: a sharper sense of clarity about what we believe we know and do not know.

Even if there are elements of certainty in a questioning frame of mind, such a mind can never fully settle. And this is perhaps the key feature of doubt: it implies some form of *movement*. Doubt tends to breed further doubt. From a methodological perspective, systematic doubt can become, as Langer (1929) puts it, a “treadmill”: “Everything must be doubted that possibly can be; and the really honest scholar, realizing that every philosopher before him has been discredited by many competent persons, becomes wary, in the end, about believing anything, for he is no longer satisfied with the ‘self-evidence’ of his assumptions. He refutes his own ideas, and finally is faced with a choice between blind dogmatic beliefs, or no beliefs at all—between skepticism, or animal faith” (p. 380). This characterization of the “treadmill” effect of

constant doubting resonates with Climacus's experience, but Kierkegaard wants to remind us that there is more at stake here than methodological frustration. Doubting, as an intellectual orientation, has moral consequences.

In subjecting everything to doubt, we change ourselves as human beings; we create a mode of being from which there is no escape. Once formed as a doubting subject, one cannot simply dispense with fresh doubts as they arise. Once developed, a doubting consciousness prods us whether we want it to or not; it will not leave us alone, and even if we manage to push it into the background temporarily it often rears its head again precisely when we wish it would disappear. Doubt can inhibit the formation of virtues such as trust and acceptance and in so doing undermine our relationships with others. Doubt, when taken to extremes, can be utterly debilitating, harming not only the life of the doubter but also those with whom the doubter associates. These possibilities were both theorized and exemplified, in a highly personalized way, by Miguel de Unamuno. In Unamuno's life and work, the connection between doubt and despair comes into particularly sharp focus. Doubt haunted Unamuno and exerted an influence on almost everything he wrote. But in Unamuno's failure to "escape" from his doubts, there are also some important lessons for educationists, and these will be considered in the next section.

## **Doubt, Despair, and Hope: Unamuno and the Promise of Education**

Unamuno held Kierkegaard in the highest esteem. Already multilingual, Unamuno taught himself Danish just so that he could read the man he considered an intellectual "brother" in his original language. Kierkegaard's (1985) dissatisfaction with the modern Western philosophical account of doubt is mirrored in Unamuno's writings but expressed in more direct terms. Unamuno distinguishes between methodical doubt, as portrayed by Descartes, and passionate doubt—the "eternal conflict between reason and feeling, between science and life, between the logical and the biotic" (Unamuno, 1972, p. 120). The former is a kind of theoretical game; the latter is crucial in defining us as human beings. For Unamuno, the quest to know, through philosophical inquiry among other means, is not merely an intellectual exercise; it is an important part of the process of giving our lives meaning, substance, and purpose. Unamuno himself lived this way, desperately seeking to dispense with his doubts, but never quite succeeding in doing so. Unamuno's doubts were

expressed not just to amuse himself but as a manifestation of his searching for an answer to what he saw as the most pressing question of all: the possibility of immortality. Unamuno had an “overpowering fear of death” (Shanley, 1977, p. 257). In considering Unamuno’s views on doubt, then, it is also important to examine his pronouncements on matters of faith and belief.

In his classic work, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, Unamuno recognizes in himself his *will* to believe in life after death, while simultaneously acknowledging the absurdity of such a belief from a purely rational point of view. He does not himself possess a simple faith that all will be well—indeed, he is driven more by nagging doubts—but he cautions against the development of a form of bitterness toward those who do see the world in these terms. He is highly critical of those rationalists who, in finding themselves unable to believe, lash out in anger at those who do have faith. This hatred, he observes, has led to the persecution of Christians, among others, and is fundamentally hypocritical. A professed commitment to rationalism can become profoundly irrational. There is also hypocrisy in the refusal among rationalists to admit that reason dissolves and disheartens (pp. 106–107). Unamuno’s disdain for rationalists who exhibit these characteristics is matched by his admiration for those who strive to believe in immortality but find, in all sincerity, that they cannot. This is, he says, “the most noble, most profound, most human and most fruitful attitude and state of mind” (p. 107). Such an attitude captures what Unamuno understands by despair. Despair is seen not as a condition to be avoided; instead, in exercising our reflective capacities as human beings, we find we *cannot* avoid it and must face up to it.

Unamuno is wary of the attempt under Catholicism, and scholastic theology in particular, to make faith conform to the dictates of reason. This has arisen, he argues, from a sense of insecurity among those who profess to believe. Faith, no longer sure of itself, “sought to establish a foundation, not *against* reason, which is where it stands, but *upon* reason, that is, within reason itself” (p. 84). Such an enterprise, Unamuno maintains, is doomed to failure. Reason, the “enemy” of faith, turns back against those who seek to harness it (p. 83). Unamuno concedes that there is a price to be paid by those who believe—they must suppress what their intellect demands of them—but this is exaggerated by the “all or nothing” approach to accepting religious dogma. To expect people to believe too much—to accept apparently absurd doctrines—not only invites skepticism but can lead to the opposite of what was intended: to the total rejection of belief. From Unamuno’s perspective, the danger lies not just in believing too much but in “attempting to believe with

one's reason rather than one's life" (p. 86). Attempting to ground dogmatic theology in reason ends up not only alienating disbelievers but also failing to satisfy reason. Unamuno maintains that faith and reason will always be in tension with each other; trying to force one upon the other is, as he sees it, a fruitless exercise.

According to Unamuno, all attempts to rationalize or scientize religious belief can be traced back to the key human attribute of intelligence: "a dreadful matter." Intelligence "tends toward death in the way that memory tends toward stability." Unamuno elaborates:

That which lives, that which is absolutely unstable, absolutely individual, is, strictly speaking, unintelligible. Logic tends to reduce everything to identities and genera, to a state where each representation has no more than one single selfsame content in whatever place, time, or relation the representation may occur to us. But nothing is the same for two successive moments of its being. My idea of God is different each time I conceive it. Identity, which is death, is precisely what the intellect seeks. The mind seeks what is dead, for the living escapes it. It seeks to congeal the flowing stream into blocks of ice. It seeks to arrest the flow. (p. 100)

He continues with these memorable words:

In order to understand anything it must first be killed, laid out rigid in the mind. Science is a cemetery of dead ideas, even though live ideas are born out of it. Worms, also, feed on corpses. My own thoughts, tumultuous and agitated in the recesses of my mind, once torn up by their roots from my heart, poured out upon this paper and here fixed in unalterable form, are already the cadavers of thought. (pp. 100–101)

For Unamuno, neither science specifically nor reason more generally can provide the sustenance we need in responding to our underlying longing for immortality. To the contrary, reason, bounded by its own limits, leads us to the conclusion that we cannot persist. Reason is in essence skeptical. Reason, in probing and inquiring, in seeking explanations, disrupts the flow of life. Unamuno argues that, as a destructive and dissolving force, it in effect turns back on itself, casting doubt on its own validity. Like Nietzsche before him, but in a very different way, Unamuno foreshadows a key theme in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophical debate: the question of relativism: "A stomach ulcer ends by causing the stomach to digest itself, and reason ends by destroying the immediate and absolute validity of the concept of truth and of the concept of necessity. Both concepts are relative: there is no absolute truth, no absolute necessity" (p. 116). Absolute relativism, Unamuno suggests, is the "supreme

triumph of ratiocinating reason” (p. 117). In this sense, reason destroys itself and if it was possible for us to remain purely and exclusively in the embrace of reason, it would destroy us.

These claims have important educational implications. Few would deny that education is, or ought to be, concerned at least in part—and perhaps in *large* part—with the development of reason. This position has been well defended in educational philosophy, via the work of Peters, Hirst, and Dearden (the “London School”), Israel Scheffler, Harvey Siegel, and many others. Unamuno’s point, however, is that as living, feeling, willing human beings, we dwell not merely within the realm of reason but also outside it—in the domains of the irrational and contra-rational, the absurd and the uncertain (pp. 115–116). As Unamuno was fond of saying, “everything vital is, not only irrational, but anti-rational, and everything rational is anti-vital” (p. 39). In his writings, Unamuno is not *against* reason; his point is rather that we must be aware of its *limits*. In Unamuno’s terms, “in order for truth to matter, it must be lived” (Evans, 2008, p. 1113). If we expect reason to “resolve” the deepest problems we face as human beings, we will, Unamuno suggests, ultimately be disappointed. We must, he says, begin with ourselves—with how we exist in the world—and examine reason in relation to our longings, frustrations, hopes, and interactions with others. As Unamuno puts it in commenting on Descartes:

The defect in Descartes’s *Discourse on Method* does not lie in the methodical prior doubt, in the fact that he begins by resolving to doubt everything, which is no more than a mere artifice; the defect lies in his resolving to begin by leaving himself out, omitting Descartes, the real man, the man of flesh and blood, the man who does not want to die, so that he can become a mere thinker, that is, an abstraction. But the real man reappears and works his way into the philosophy. (Unamuno, 1972, p. 39)

Unamuno sees great significance in Descartes’s confession that prior to subjecting his beliefs and interests to the rigorous scrutiny of science and reason, he loved poetry, delighted in mathematics, thought highly of eloquence, and sought to go to Heaven. In these elements of his work, Unamuno sees the real Descartes, at odds with the method he seeks to apply to himself. For Unamuno, Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum* rests on a mistake: a confusion between knowing and being (in its fuller sense):

“I think, therefore I am” can only mean, “I think, therefore I am a thinker”; the *being* in the *I am*, derived from *I think*, is no more than a knowing; that *being* is knowledge, not life. The primary reality is not that I think, but that I live, for those who do not

think also live, even though that kind of living is not a true life. So many contradictions, dear Lord, when we try to wed life to reason! ... The truth is *sum, ergo cogito*—I am, therefore I think, though not everything that is, thinks.

As Unamuno sees it, Descartes could equally have said “I feel, therefore I am,” or “I will, therefore I am.” When trying to understand what it means to be a human being, then, we must see thinking, feeling, and willing as intertwined. We do not merely think thoughts but also feel them. And to direct our thoughts, and bring them back on task when we stray, the will must find regular exercise. For Unamuno, each of these inner elements of the human being is ultimately directed toward self-preservation of one kind or another: a continuation of our being in some form.

Unamuno’s notion of continuation is directly connected to his own personal longing for immortality. He wants to survive, not in the abstract, not symbolically, not as an impersonal element absorbed into a greater divine wholeness; it is he, the man, Miguel de Unamuno, with all his shortcomings, his suffering, his fragilities, who wants to go on. Unamuno was, in many respects, the embodiment of a notion of anguish captured so effectively by Jean-Paul Sartre: “Anguish is precisely my consciousness of being my own future, in the mode of not-being” (Sartre, 1958, p. 32). In some respects, this is the great weakness of Unamuno’s work: his musings on immortality, on reason, faith, and feeling, can seem too idiosyncratically individualistic, too self-centered. Why, it might be asked, should we take him seriously as a thinker, a philosopher, when he is, by his own admission, concerned more with *himself* than with theoretical rigor? One answer is to say that this weakness is simultaneously a strength, for it is in showing us how deeply embedded our philosophical concerns are with the most fundamental questions of human existence, as lived, that his work gains its force and significance. Unamuno will *not let us go*. He shakes us from our slumbers, his obsession with immortality reminding us of just how important the question of death, and its relationship to consciousness, is to our sense of the meaning of life (see also, Tolstoy, 1987). In so doing, he *teaches* us, through his own example, through the ideas he conveys in books such as *The Tragic Sense of Life*, and via the dilemmas faced, decisions made, and actions taken of his characters in his novels and short stories (see Unamuno, 1972, 1996, 2000). Life, Unamuno teaches us, is a constant process of *struggle*. The playing out of this process of struggle in Unamuno’s novels is, in part, the author forming him- or herself through the word, but it is also a matter of creating—forming—readers (cf. Weber, 1973, p. 209).

Unamuno returns us to the Greek roots of the term “agony.” As William Barrett (1972) points out, in contemporary English, this word is now used principally to refer to physical or emotional pain. But the Greek word *agonia* means a contest or struggle (p. 362). *Agons* were “endurance contests staged in ancient Greece in which combatants demonstrated their skill through arduous competitive games” (Kuhlman, 1994, p. 31). Unamuno retains the idea of a battle that was implied by the Greeks, but turns this into something that speaks to the meaning of our existence as human beings. The element of pain that we still recognize in our current use of the term “agony” becomes a constant in the process of life itself: to live is to be in agony. For Unamuno, this is intimately connected with our awareness of death. E.M. Cioran (1992) observes: “Since death is immanent in life, almost all of life is an agony” (p. 16). There is an important connection in this aspect of Unamuno’s work with a point made in the first section of this chapter: to doubt is part of what it means to live as a human being, and doubt, like life itself, implies movement. Unamuno teaches us that we can never quite sit still; we must learn to live with an inner existential restlessness. For Unamuno, the process of searching never ends.

At first glance, these ideas may appear to hold little educational promise, but that is perhaps partly because in the West we have become so steeped in the language of reducing struggle and suffering. The aim in many contemporary educational circles often seems to be to make learning less difficult, less painful. Learning quickly and easily is typically regarded as highly desirable. Learning, we are told, should be entertaining—it should be fun. Learning is expected to enhance happiness, not diminish it (see further, Roberts, 2013a). From Unamuno, however, we can come to appreciate that if education is, in one way or another, always a matter of learning how to live, this implies that we will also learn how to struggle. And through struggle, as Aeschylus (2003) recognized long before Unamuno, we learn. This does not mean all forms of struggle are equally productive or worthwhile from an educational point of view. But for Unamuno, the forms of learning that matter most—those connected with the existential questions identified at the beginning of this chapter—cannot occur without struggle. If the capacity for struggle no longer exists, if we no longer have to wrestle with doubt and despair, we are, in an important sense, no longer human (Barrett, 1972, p. 362; cf. Dienstag, 2006). Unamuno helps us in fulfilling this vocation, describing his task in uncompromising terms:

[T]he truth is that my work—my mission, I was about to say—is to shatter the faith of men, left, right and center, their faith in affirmation, their faith in negation, their

faith in abstention, and I do so from faith in faith itself. My purpose is to war on all those who submit, whether to Catholicism, or to rationalism, or to agnosticism. My aim is to make all men live a life of restless longing. (Unamuno, 1972, p. 349)

The language here is unusually insistent, almost aggressive in tone. But this is something we must face, as kindred spirits to Kierkegaard's *Climacus*, in going down a philosophical and pedagogical path. For Unamuno, philosophy does not provide "consolation" (Boethius, 2000); it disrupts and destabilizes. Education, similarly, is a process of *unsettling* us as human beings. In this sense and others, it is a "risky" process (Biesta, 2014; Freire, 1994, 1998a, 1998b). Doubt implies a kind of permanent restlessness, a state of disequilibrium, and with this a sense of discomfort. In becoming educated, we learn to live with uncertainty and with suffering as well as joy. Indeed, Unamuno argues that faith, belief, and commitment are not weaker but *stronger* through the experience of uncertainty. (See also, Olson, 1989.)

Unamuno's starting point in considering the potential value of uncertainty is simple acknowledgment of its existence:

[T]he fact that the sense of uncertainty, and the inner struggle of reason against both faith and the passionate longing for eternal life, together serve as the basis for action and a foundation for morals, this fact would, in the eyes of a pragmatist, justify the sense of uncertainty. But I must make clear that I do not seek out such a practical consequence in order to justify this uncertainty; it is simply that I encounter it in my inner experience. Nor do I wish nor would I wish to seek any justification for this state of inner struggle and uncertainty and longing: it is a fact, and that suffices. (Unamuno, 1972, p. 142)

"The most robust faith," Unamuno maintains, "is based on uncertainty" (p. 205). Faith ultimately relies on trust in *someone*—whether this is a specific individual, or a group of people, or God as the personalization of the Universe—who assures us of *something*. Faith provides the basis, the substance, for hope. In this sense, it is hope that is the higher principle. We *create* faith, Unamuno wants to say, because we hope for existence of a God, and we come to believe in God because this is consistent with our hope for eternal life. The question of whether Unamuno himself truly believed in God has been much debated (see, for example, Baker, 1990; Mermall, 1978; Summerhill, 1978), but arguably he is best described as an agnostic. He perhaps did not even know himself whether he believed; but what he could not deny was that he doubted. Doubting for Unamuno is not antithetical to faith but utterly consistent with it: "Whoever believes he believes in God, but believes without

passion, without anguish, with uncertainty, without doubt, without despair-in-consolation, believes only in the God-Idea, not in God Himself” (p. 211).

From Unamuno we can learn that our appreciation of all that life has to offer is, or can be, *enhanced*, not undermined, by our understanding of pain and despair. For Unamuno, “[I]t is only out of the abyss of despair that hope can emanate” (Henry, 1985, p. 75). To begin to grasp how and why this is so, we must break away from the notion of education providing a “solution” to the problem of despair. Hughes (1978), in reflecting on the educational significance of Unamuno’s work, poses the question: “But how does one overcome the tragic sense of life?” Unamuno’s answer, he suggests, is that “one *doesn’t*; it can only be reaffirmed through perpetual doubt and struggle, and the goal of education is to ‘wake up the sleeping ones’ to this essential human condition through the very language they speak” (p. 137). Hughes continues:

[A]s Unamuno saw, the essence of education is in the question, not the answer. It is in uncertainty, not certainty; suffering, not happiness; pain, not joy. The triumphs of technology and the mass media are enough to put us all to sleep; education must lead not to security, but *insecurity*. This insecurity is not the garden variety found in psychological texts which inhibits the person’s ability to cope with modernity, but rather that which continually prods him onward through dissatisfaction and doubt, through paradox and contradiction, to seek *true* immortality, not the blissful promises of traditional Christian after-life. Essentially, Unamuno was of one mind with the poet Dylan Thomas: “Do not go gentle into that good night / Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” (p. 137)

## Closing Remarks

In his 2009 book, *Educating for Meaningful Lives*, Scott Webster observes that “schooling in the western world has all too often been subservient to market and political demands” (Webster, 2009, p. xiii). A concern with *educative* learning, keenly pursued as a philosophical question in the 1960s and 1970s, has given way to a dominant institutional and policy focus on training in competencies deemed “relevant” to employment and economic advancement (pp. 3–4). Webster seeks to recover a form of educational thinking that takes “why” questions seriously. The “why” questions he has in mind are those relating to the meaning, significance, and purpose of life (see also Baggini, 2004). “It is not enough,” Webster points out, to claim that “you need to do such and such in order to continue to sustain your existence” or “in order for

us all to live at peace together” because sooner or later we must confront a deeper question: “why do we even exist?” (Webster, 2009, p. ix). This kind of inquiry, as we have seen in this chapter, is exactly what occupied Miguel de Unamuno. Webster argues that our endeavor as human beings to respond to the question “what is the meaning of life” is “a matter of life and death” (p. xii). Unamuno would have shared this view. Education, for Unamuno as for Webster, can be seen as the lifelong, social process of grappling with the meaning of our own existence.

Unamuno was not content with considering whether philosophy began with doubt. He wanted to ask who is doing the doubting, about what, and *why*. Doubt, from Unamuno’s point of view, is not merely a prompt for inquiry but a condition for realizing our humanity. For Unamuno, certainty and doubt are intertwined; both rely on each other for their intelligibility. We can only have doubts about some things if we hold, even if only temporarily, other things to be true. Education creates uncertainty, but uncertainty also creates us. Unamuno’s work allows us to speak of what might be called “educational agnosticism”: an orientation to the world, and to the process of learning through searching and struggle, that admits to doubts and to the forms of despair that go along with them (cf. Vernon, 2011). The reference to agnosticism need not imply a concern with spiritual questions, but has to do more with “why” questions identified by Webster. The agnosticism signaled here implies a willingness to question but also a recognition that we cannot question all things all the time. Against the excessive certainties of both dogmatic belief and dismissive skepticism, educational agnosticism demands a posture of radical openness. This form of openness is radical because it goes to the root of what it means to be human: if we are too quick to judge, or too ready to accept without question, or too insistent on finding “solutions” to the problems that confront us, we cannot fulfill our task as beings who ask “why?” To be open in this way requires humility but not servitude, acceptance but not resignation.

Kierkegaard’s answer to the despair engendered by doubt was to make a “leap of faith” (Kierkegaard, 1987, 1989, 2009). Unamuno supported a certain kind of faith, and theorized its connection with hope, but was never able to quite make the leap advocated by Kierkegaard. He *wanted* to believe, and most of all he wanted to live on, with all his faults and suffering. But he could not shake his uncertainties, and in the end he came to see that they defined him and gave him hope. Unamuno came to accept, as far as he could accept anything, that he would always struggle. Hope for Unamuno resided not in

the escape from doubt and despair but in the very possibility of these modes of human experience. Doubt and despair remind us that we are *alive*: restless, uncomfortable, moving. Education, as a process of ongoing searching, arises from doubt and creates new doubts. The “promise” of education, or at least education of the kind implied by Unamuno’s work, is that it will make life not simpler and easier but richer, more complex, and often more difficult than it was before. Education opens us up to both greater suffering and the possibility of better recognizing and responding to such suffering in others. It brings with it new burdens and ethical responsibilities but also the prospect of experiencing more fully the beauty and goodness that is within and all around us (see further, Roberts, 2013a, 2013b; Solomon, 1999, 2002). Like Kierkegaard’s Climacus, we find, in being educated, that there is no going back; we must learn to live with the new modes of understanding we develop on an educational journey. But the lenses through which we view ourselves and the world are not fixed; they continue to change and evolve as new educational experiences are integrated with those from our past. Western philosophy may begin with doubt, but Unamuno allows us to appreciate why, in committing to the process of education, we should not want that doubt to end.

## ATTENTION, ASCETICISM, AND GRACE:

### Simone Weil and Higher Education

Academic work is one of those fields containing a pearl so precious that it is worth while to sell all our possessions, keeping nothing for ourselves, in order to be able to acquire it. (Weil, 2001a, p. 65)

The past two decades have witnessed a revival of interest in the work of Simone Weil. Weil died in 1943, aged just 34, but the writings she left behind have influenced philosophers, theologians, classicists, novelists, literary theorists, and social activists, among others. To date, however, Weil's books have attracted relatively little attention from educationists (exceptions include Caranfa, 2010; Lewin, 2014; Liston, 2008; Smith, 2001; Tubbs, 2005b). This is surprising, given the obvious connections between Weil's ideas and those advanced by a number of other educational thinkers. These links are especially strong in areas such as spirituality and education, feminist theory in education, and critical pedagogy. Weil worked in schools and some of her writings address educational questions directly. More broadly, it might be said that in Weil's epistemology and ethic, the basis for a distinctive approach to teaching and learning can be found.

This chapter identifies some of the key concepts in Weil's thought—gravity, grace, decreation, and attention—and considers their educational implications. It is argued that much can be learned from Weil in seeking to recover the

“soul” of higher education. The term “soul” is employed here not in a religious sense but rather as an indication of something deeper, more essential, in higher educational life than the world of surface appearances. This point has wider significance in considering the nature of Weil’s language and the potential value of her work. In her later writings (e.g., Weil, 2001a) Weil makes frequent reference to “God,” in a manner that can be uncomfortable or off-putting for those working in secular disciplines in the university. She also speaks elsewhere (Weil, 2002) of “the needs of the soul.” Her use of such terminology is, however, built upon a broader platform of philosophical understanding and her comments on matters of faith are likewise of importance well beyond the theological sphere. Education is one domain where this is most readily apparent. Weil, I hope to show, helps us to understand the potentially redemptive value of suffering in learning; she allows us to rethink the process of knowing; she reminds us of the need for humility in teaching; and she demonstrates the importance of linking principles with practice in ethics and education.

## Gravity, Decreation, and Grace

Weil argues that our natural condition is one of *gravity*; the only exception is *grace* (Weil, 1997, p. 45). What does she mean by this? Our natural tendency, Weil suggests, is to take the easier path—to immerse ourselves in what is comfortable, avoiding wherever possible difficulty and suffering. Baseness and superficiality are a result of gravity. When one human being shows another that he or she needs another and the latter withdraws or hesitates, this too is due to gravity. Gravity of the soul is like gravity in the physical world: it draws us, with the force of a law, downwards. As human beings, we can expect things to happen in accordance with the laws of gravity, unless there is supernatural intervention. The source of our moral energy lies outside us, just as is the case with the sources of our physical energy (food, water, air, and so on). We tend to believe the basis for our preservation, as both moral and physical beings, lies within ourselves, but we are mistaken. It is only when we suffer privation that we feel a need, and cannot find it in ourselves. Indeed, we must be delivered from “self”: Weil refers to this as a process of *decreation*. If we think we gain this deliverance by means of our own energy, we will, Weil says, be like a cow pulling at a hobble and thus falling on to its knees. We liberate a certain amount of energy within ourselves, but this in turn degrades more energy. We need, instead, to feed on light, and when this capacity has been lost, all faults are possible.

Creation, Weil claims, “is composed of the descending movement of gravity, the ascending movement of grace, and the descending movement of the second degree of grace. ... Grace is the law of the descending movement” (p. 48). Affliction lowers us in some respects but can also raise us in the domain of moral gravity. Moral gravity makes us, as Weil puts it, “fall toward the heights” (p. 48). We have a tendency, Weil maintains, to spread suffering beyond ourselves. When affliction is too great, we become degraded. The energy supplied by higher emotions is limited, and when a situation demands of us that we go beyond this limit we tend to fall back on lower feelings such as fear, envy, resentment, and the desire for outward recognition and honors. These lower emotions are richer in energy, but they are also degraded.

If we take the path of not exercising all the power at our disposal (and this includes the power to do harm to others), we endure what Weil calls “the void.” This, she stresses, is contrary to the laws of nature, to the force of gravity, and grace alone makes it possible. Grace, Weil says, “fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void” (p. 55). Accepting the void requires supernatural energy, but for the void to be created first there must be “a tearing out, something desperate has to take place” (p. 56). The void, then, emerges from a “dark night of the soul,” and Weil herself experienced this, to varying degrees and in different ways, at several pivotal moments in her short life. Indeed, Sonia Kovitz argues that Weil “spent most of her life in this obscure, dark and terrible state” (Kovitz, 1992, p. 263). One must, Weil says, go through a period with no detectable reward, external or internal, natural or supernatural. Attaining total detachment—experiencing the void—requires more than affliction; it must be affliction with no apparent consolation. This means being willing to accept a kind of death. “To love truth,” Weil observes, “means to endure the void and, as a result, to accept death. Truth is on the side of death” (p. 56).

Reality as we ordinarily perceive it is the result of our attachment; it is “the reality of the self which we transfer into things” (p. 59). Independent reality can only be discovered through detachment. Detachment necessitates the emptying of desire. If we can detach our desire from all good things and wait, our waiting will be satisfied; it is then that “we touch the absolute good” (p. 58). Weil comments further: “Always, beyond the particular object whatever it may be, we have to fix our will on the void, to will the void. For the good which we can neither picture nor define is a void for us. But this void is fuller than all fullnesses” (p. 58).

Relentless necessity, wretchedness, distress, the crushing burden of poverty, and of labor which wears us out, cruelty, torture, violent death, constraint, disease—all these constitute divine love. It is God who in love withdraws from us so that we can love him. For if we were exposed to the direct radiance of his love, without the protection of space, of time, and of matter, we should be evaporated like water in the sun; there would not be enough “I” in us to make it possible to surrender the “I” for love’s sake. Necessity is the screen set between God and us so that we can be. It is for us to pierce through the screen so that we cease to be. (pp. 78–79)

Decreating—piercing this screen—is not merely an intellectual process. Intelligence, Weil says, “has nothing to discover, it has only to clear the ground. It is only good for servile tasks” (p. 58). The good appears to be a nothingness, because “there is no *thing* that is good. But this nothingness is not unreal. Compared with it everything in existence is unreal” (p. 58). Imagination is not always helpful either, for it is “continually at work filling up all the fissures through which grace might pass” (p. 62). Imagination is “essentially a liar” (p. 62), doing away with the third dimension we find in real objects and complex relationships. The past and the future can hinder the potentially beneficial effects of affliction by providing “an unlimited field for imaginary elevation” (p. 62). Time can become a substitute for eternity. We must learn, Weil suggests, to live in the present in a manner that corresponds to finality, reaches through to the eternal.

As individuals, we have the distinctive capacity to say “I.” For Weil, the only free act we have been given to accomplish is to destroy that “I,” to give it over to God. If, through grace, we begin the process of destroying the “I,” affliction cannot harm us. If we have attained a state of perfection, having completely destroyed the “I” in ourselves, affliction can no longer destroy the “I” from the outside.

But affliction produces an effect which is equivalent, on the plane of perfection, to the exterior destruction of the “I.” It produces the absence of God. “My God, why has thou forsaken me?” ... Redemptive suffering is that by which evil really has fullness of being to the utmost extent of its capacity ... By redemptive suffering, God is present in extreme evil. For the absence of God is the mode of divine presence which corresponds to evil—absence which is felt. He who has not God within himself cannot feel his absence. (p. 72)

Not all forms of suffering are redemptive. Weil speaks of “expiatory” suffering as a kind of shock we feel in return for harm we have done to others. Redemptive suffering, by contrast, is “the shadow of the pure good we desire”

(p. 123). We should seek not to avoid suffering but to experience it fully. We should love suffering not because it is useful but because it is (p. 131). Joy and sorrow are not opposed to each other; rather, it is in the varieties of both joy and sorrow that differences are to be found. If joy is “the overflowing consciousness of reality,” suffering “while preserving our consciousness of reality is better” (p. 132). Suffering is to joy what hunger is to food (p. 136). Redemptive suffering “strips suffering naked and brings it in its purity up to existence” (p. 143). Pleasure may be innocent, Weil notes, provided we do not seek knowledge in it; knowledge should be sought only through suffering. Weil concludes:

It is necessary to have had a revelation of reality through joy in order to find reality through suffering. Otherwise life is nothing but a more or less evil dream. ... We must attain knowledge of a still fuller reality in suffering, which is a nothingness and a void. In the same way we have to love life greatly in order to love death still more. (p. 136)

## Implications for Higher Education

What can we learn from Simone Weil in reflecting on higher education? In many respects, the contemporary university seems a world away from the ideals Weil articulated. Knowledge has become a commodity to be traded and exchanged in the same way as other goods and services. There is an emphasis on competition between and within institutions, and considerable sums of money are devoted to advertising and other forms of marketing. An individualistic attitude is fostered. There are strong incentives for academics to become intellectual entrepreneurs, and students are encouraged to put themselves and their careers ahead of other considerations in their higher educational decisions. The university of today is a heavily bureaucratic institution, with a complex array of committees, Boards, and working groups. Those in positions of leadership are often seen more as managers than academics, and the university, in its structure, operation, and ethos, has much in common with the modern corporation. In such an environment, it is easy to lose sight of some of the deeper educational, epistemological, and ethical goals that arguably should underpin university life. Simone Weil reminds us, indirectly, of why these goals remain important. Her work, it might be said, is helpful in recovering the “soul” of higher education.

## The Importance of Attention

One of the keys to seeking the kind of redemption Weil advocates is *attention*, and education has a potentially pivotal role to play here. Weil's account of attention appears in a number of books, including *Gravity and Grace* (Weil, 1997) and *Waiting for God* (Weil, 2001a). This concept has long been regarded as central to Weil's philosophy, and has been explored and applied by Iris Murdoch (2001) and a number of other thinkers (e.g., Cameron, 2003; Lewin, 2014; McDonough, 2000; Pirruccello, 1995; Rozelle-Stone, 2009; von der Ruhr, 2006). In *Waiting for God*, Weil addresses the theme of attention in relation to school studies, but her ideas clearly have relevance for higher education as well. Weil describes attention as follows:

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relations to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it. (Weil, 2001a, p. 62)

Weil argues that the development of attention is the underlying goal of all school study, even if this is not acknowledged or recognized. Most school tasks, she suggests, have their own intrinsic interest, and children may declare their love of particular subjects, but underpinning all of these activities is the need to develop the power of attention. On this account, a lack of aptitude or taste for a given subject need not impede progress in the development of attention. Indeed, Weil claims, having to struggle to solve a problem or study a theorem can be an advantage. Genuine effort of attention is never wasted; “[i]t always has its effect on the spiritual plane and in consequence on the lower one of the intelligence, for all spiritual light lightens the mind” (p. 58). Weil maintains that students should apply themselves equally to all their tasks, not concerning themselves with their natural abilities and preferences, with no wish for external success in the form of high marks or examination passes (p. 59). Students should, to be sure, attempt to complete a task correctly and well, but the deeper purpose underlying all such efforts is the development of the habit and power of attention.

Weil prompts us to rethink the process of knowing. Developing our capacity for attention is both an epistemological and a moral process. Weil notes that “every time ... a human being succeeds in making an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it, even if his effort produces no visible fruit” (p. 59). A desire to know, as applied through an effort of attention, thus becomes a process of knowing, even if this is not self-evident to the knower at the time. Similarly, “[i]f we turn our mind toward the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself” (Weil, 1997, p. 170). The benefits of our efforts in studying will sometimes only be felt after many years have passed and often in domains seemingly disconnected from the original areas to which the effort had been applied.

If we are to be open to the truth, we must not seize on an idea too hastily. We must want to learn, but we should not be too eager, too active in seeking to know. This is, in part, what makes the development of attention so difficult. From Weil’s perspective, “[w]e do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them” (Weil, 2001a, p. 62). Weil elaborates:

In every school exercise there is a special way of waiting upon truth, setting our hearts upon it, yet not allowing ourselves to go out in search of it. There is a way of giving our attention to the data of a problem in geometry without trying to find the solution or to the words of a Latin or Greek text without trying to arrive at the meaning, a way of waiting, when we are writing, for the right word to come of itself at the end of our pen, while we merely reject all inadequate words. (p. 63)

It is not a matter of coming to understand new things so much as coming to “understand with our whole self the truths which are evident” (Weil, 1997, p. 169). This demands a certain drawing back from the object of study. We can better obtain the fruits of our efforts through an indirect method, much as we might allow grapes to fall by pulling at the bunch (pp. 170–171). Paulo Freire advanced a similar idea, arguing that if we are to come closer to understanding the object of study, we must gain some distance from it (see Freire, 1998a; Freire & Shor, 1987). For Weil, it is crucial that we avoid becoming too attached to the object of our efforts; we should not want it too much, or become excessively devoted to it (Weil, 1997, p. 170).

In higher education, we often encourage students to develop self-discipline in their studies. This involves, in part, a strengthening of the will—a mustering of intellectual energy in a determined effort to complete a task. Weil’s

work suggests a subtle but important shift in focus here. Attention, she says, should not be confused with a kind of forced application of muscular energy. Students, when instructed to pay attention, will often contract their brows, hold their breath, and stiffen their muscles. When asked after a short period what they have been paying attention to, they cannot say. Study is often characterized by this sort of muscular effort—an effort that tires us out but provides only an illusion that we have been working effectively (Weil, 2001a, pp. 60–61). It is not the idea of effort that is out of place here but the form of effort and the object to which it is applied. As Weil points out, “[w]hat could be more stupid than to tighten up our muscles and set our jaws about virtue, or poetry, or the solution of a problem? Attention is something quite different.” (Weil, 1997, p. 169). Will power may be needed in getting through a day of manual labor, but for Weil it has little value in study. “The intelligence,” Weil says, “can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running” (Weil, 2001a, p. 61). Attention does involve effort, but it is what Weil calls a “negative” effort. Attention in itself does not lead to tiredness. Tiredness can make it very difficult to pay attention. When we are tired, it is often better to stop working altogether and to relax for a while before returning to face our task afresh. As Weil puts it, “[t]wenty minutes of concentrated, untired attention is infinitely better than three hours of the kind of frowning application that leads us to say with a sense of duty done: ‘I have worked well!’” (p. 61).

Attention, then, is a matter of watching and waiting and through it, Weil believes, we move nearer to God. Attention is also fundamental in caring for others. Those who are suffering and unhappy need, more than anything else, people willing and able to give them their attention. Pity and kindness are not enough. The capacity to give one’s attention to someone who is suffering is “a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle” (p. 64). Developing the power of attention through study assists not only in our acquisition of academic knowledge but in our understanding of others and our ability to help them when this is most needed. We must, Weil suggests, come to see ourselves, our tasks and others in a new way:

The love of our neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: “What are you going through?” It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled “unfortunate,” but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction.

For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way. [...] This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth. (pp. 64–65)

## Humility, Suffering, and Educational Growth

Weil shows, through both her writing and her life, the importance of humility in education. Reflecting on academic weaknesses can be helpful in developing our power of attention; there is value, she suggests, in contemplating, carefully and slowly, tasks we have failed (pp. 59–60). But if this process is to work well we need to set aside the “lower emotions” to which earlier reference was made. An act of decreation is required, where we, as far as this is possible, remove ourselves from the process and concentrate on the task and the problems themselves. Humility is necessary if we are to accept that there is much we do not know. In fact, Weil seems to imply something stronger than this. From Weil’s work it could be surmised that a certain kind of *humiliation* can have educative value. There is in Weil’s writing, and in her life, a willingness to embrace, if not actively seek out, a kind of suffering that leads us to *despair* (cf. Liston, 2000, 2008). One can imagine Weil’s world being populated by the sort of characters we find in the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky. We might say, after reading Weil, that education, if it is to truly transform, will often involve a “dark night of the soul” through which we must struggle (see Kovitz, 1992). This suffering, while immensely painful, can also bring opportunities for growth. For growth to occur, Weil suggests, we must be ready to receive and greet both suffering and joy with a kind of patient equanimity that does not come naturally to us. Educational suffering is suffering that *teaches* us, guides us, leads us closer to the void—opens the way, or plays a part in opening the way, for grace to enter. But we can only *learn* from this suffering if we are of a sufficiently open, “obedient,” consenting frame of mind.

In our classes we should, if we take Weil seriously, encourage students to examine, quietly and calmly, the suffering they undergo in their often turbulent higher educational years. This pivotal period in the emerging adult’s life is often characterized by the forces of gravity, as Weil understands that term, more than at any other time. Shallowness, self-centeredness, excessive attachment (these days, we might say, for example, to cell phones!), and a tendency to seek the easy way out are all often fully in evidence during these fragile years. Yet, this confirms

rather than diminishes the importance of the kind of redemptive suffering to which Weil refers. Learning the potential value of despair is never more needed than it is at this stage of life. Cultivating the power of attention provides a gentle corrective to the turmoil, the constant “noise” (both internal and external) that intrudes so strongly on our inner space. This form of inner work is as necessary for those of us who are teachers, at any level, as it is for students. Indeed, giving ourselves to others—attending to them and reducing our focus on ourselves—is an important part of this work. Teaching can thus become both the means through which decreation and the development of attention are made possible in others and the process through which we seek, or wait for, grace in ourselves.

In *Gravity and Grace* Weil pleads: “May God grant that I become nothing” (Weil, 1997, p. 80). She reasons thus: “Once we have understood we are nothing, the object of all our efforts is to become nothing. It is for this that we suffer with resignation, *it is for this that we act*, it is for this that we pray” (p. 80). For Weil, the self—its ego, its attachments, its desires, its habits, its susceptibility to *gravity*—is a burden we must struggle, all our lives, to shed. This idea runs completely counter to the spirit of our times. In higher education today there is every incentive to become self-centered; to focus *more* on ourselves, not less. Obtaining qualifications, winning jobs and gaining promotions will often depend on this. Weil had almost total disregard for such trappings. As a teacher, she allowed students to perform poorly in their examinations, convinced there were higher goals to be pursued in education. Her comments in *Gravity and Grace* are consistent with this:

The authentic and pure values, truth, beauty, and goodness, in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object. ... Teaching should have no aim but to prepare, by training the attention, for the possibility of such an act. ... All the other advantages of instruction are without interest. (p. 173)

Weil’s stance is not without its problems. While serving as a teacher, Weil was happy to rub against the grain of authority in fraternizing with the unemployed and refusing to teach merely for examination results. Yet, in her declaration of pleasure at the possibility of her teaching license being revoked there is, as Fielder (2001) points out, a note of “false bravado” (p. xix). A similar point might be made about some of her other actions: the period she spent in factory work, her participation in the Spanish Civil War, her planned involvement in the struggle in France during the Nazi occupation. There is in all of these actions “something a little ridiculous” (p. xix). Weil could always

turn to her parents to bail her out of trouble. The same could not be said for many of the people with whom she sympathized. The language Weil uses in reflecting on herself also warrants critical examination. At times Weil's words seem to be almost an act in self-loathing. She speaks of herself as unworthy and ignorant. It would not be too difficult to interpret some of her statements as a form of posturing. At one point, for example, she says: "I am really nothing in it all. If one could imagine any possibility of error in God, I should think that it had all happened to me by mistake. But perhaps God likes to use castaway objects, waste, rejects." (Weil, 2001a, p. 30). Later in the same letter she talks of feeling "hatred and repulsion" towards herself (p. 31). In another letter she claims: "I am such a poor unsatisfactory creature" (p. 44), a person with "miserable weaknesses" (p. 45) unworthy of salvation. This is not just Weil's projected view of herself, but her portrayal of the way *others* view her: "... for other people, in a sense I do not exist. I am the color of dead leaves, like certain unnoticed insects" (p. 53).

Another way to view these statements, however, is to see them as Weil's attempt to attain a degree of consistency between her words and her deeds. Weil could not determine the circumstances of her birth, any more than the people with whom she sympathized could determine theirs. We might say today that in depriving herself of food prior to her death Weil was not so much engaging in an act of genuine resistance as suffering from the effects of a disease (anorexia nervosa). But before we are too quick to pass judgment we might perhaps pause to reflect on how far we have been able to link principles with practice in our own lives. Most of us, I suspect, fall well short of what we would regard as ideal. Weil may have spent just nine months in a factory, but that is nine months more than many intellectuals. Weil may have had her parents as a "safety net," but (to continue the analogy) she walked a tightrope as if such a net did not exist. Her suffering was real, even if some of it was self-inflicted. Weil's asceticism was not (just) a philosophical ideal but a way of life. Finally, Weil's attempts to diminish herself in her words can be seen as just that: an effort to achieve the nothingness, the decreation, she regarded as essential for the intervention of grace.

## Concluding Comments

Simone Weil was an extraordinary woman. It must be remembered that all we have from her, her writings and recollections (by Weil herself and by others) of her deeds, occurred within such an abbreviated period of time. Thirty four

years is a very short life. Most intellectuals are just beginning to formulate their pivotal ideas at such an age, and it is remarkable to think that had Weil enjoyed good health she might still have been with us in the 1990s or even the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Weil's work has particular relevance for teaching in the arts and humanities. In the contemporary university, these areas are perhaps the most vulnerable, always under threat when cuts are made to staffing and operational budgets. Yet, they are arguably more important than ever. For, as Weil shows, it is precisely in times of adversity, of affliction, that grace can sometimes best be found. The struggle to retain robust arts and humanities programs in higher educational institutions is not merely an intellectual or political battle but a process of reclaiming the heart of the university. It is in the arts and humanities, more than in any other area of the university curriculum, that critiques of some of the trends most opposed to Weil's view of the world—utilitarianism, technocratic thought and crude materialism, among others (cf. Weil, 2001b)—are to be found. Knowledge in its commodified form, indistinguishable from mere information, is not knowledge as Weil conceived of it. Similarly, the logic of performativity, now so deeply entrenched within the university, deals, Weil might have said, with the world of appearances rather than the deeper mysteries of being. In a performance-driven higher educational environment, all that matters is that which can be measured. For Weil, it is that which cannot be measured that matters most—and the arts and humanities have, potentially at least, a key role in returning us to that. It is this ineffable quality that makes Weil's epistemology inseparable from her understanding of aesthetics and theology. The "mystery of the beautiful in nature and in the arts," from Weil's perspective, is a "sensible reflection of the mystery of faith" (Weil, 2003, p. 60).

To take Weil seriously, then, demands of us that we be prepared to examine not only some of our most cherished ideas but *ourselves* in a fresh light. The difficulty of this task cannot be underestimated (cf. Weil, 1978, pp. 190–194), and in this sense, among others, Weil's work is profoundly unsettling. The feeling of discomfort Weil creates hints at the distinctive contribution her thought can make to debates over secularism and religious education. One starting point in tackling these questions is current policy and curriculum guidelines, and critical discussion in these areas is much needed. Weil, however, offers something different. Mario von der Ruhr notes (2006, p. 27), correctly in my view, that Weil's conception of education is theocentric. But this is not a theocentrism tied to a specific church or to any organized religion;

it is more an orientation to life. Weil reminds us that theology is encountered in numerous places in higher education; not just in arts and humanities subjects but also in mathematics, the sciences, and elsewhere (cf. Finch, 2001; Morgan, 2005; Weil, 1957, 1968, 2005). There is a unity to Weil's thought and she would have resisted any attempt to confine the pursuit of questions relating to "God" or "the Good" to the discipline of theology or to a religious studies curriculum.

The breadth of Weil's influence is testimony to the power of her work: she speaks to many, opening up pathways for others to continue. Education is one such pathway, and this chapter has barely scratched the surface in exploring some of the implications of Weil's thought for teaching and learning. There is much more that might be said, for example, about Weil's political philosophy and its significance for education as a process of social change. There are clear links between Weil's concept of attention and the process of meditation, as this has been understood in various Eastern and Western traditions, and there could be gains for educationists in pursuing such comparisons further. Weil's approach to knowledge and knowing, and her understanding of the human personality, also merit deeper educational investigation. These are just some of the many potentially fruitful avenues for ongoing inquiry. We should be grateful to Simone Weil for making such work possible.



## HOPE, DESPAIR, AND LIBERATION:

### Paulo Freire and Educational Struggle

Paulo Freire has long been regarded as a pedagogue of hope. The link between hope and education has been explored by a number of thinkers over the centuries (see Halpin, 2003). Freire addresses this theme most directly in *Pedagogy of Hope* (Freire, 1994), but references to hope appear frequently in his other writings, from the classic early text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972a) to posthumously published books such as *A Pedagogy of Indignation* (Freire, 2004) and *Daring to Dream* (Freire, 2007). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire speaks of hope as one of several fundamental requirements for authentic dialogue, the other pre-requisites being love, humility, faith, and critical thinking (1972a, pp. 62–65). At first glance, it might appear as if Freire is trying to inspire rather than theorize here, with a rallying cry based on a set of virtues similar to those found in the Christian Gospels. An appeal to hope in this manner, it might be said, could have rhetorical value but has no place in serious educational scholarship. This chapter suggests that such an interpretation of Freire's intentions would be a mistake. When Freire's work is read holistically, it is clear that he provides a robust philosophical justification for the pedagogical significance of hope, regarding it as not merely a practical necessity but a defining feature of human existence (see further, Kirylo, 2011; McLaren, 2000; Mayo, 1999; Morrow and Torres, 2002; Roberts, 2000; Schugurensky, 2012). Hope for Freire has ontological, epistemological,

ethical, and educational dimensions. While it is true that Freire's writing often had an informal and personal register, it is equally true that he wanted to make the case for the importance of hope as rigorous and compelling as possible. Slogans and wishful thinking would not do. Hope as Freire conceived of it is gritty, grounded and complex. Hope, I shall argue, is intimately connected with Freire's experience, observation, and analysis of *despair*, and both of these notions are essential if we are to understand what makes a Freirean approach to oppression, liberation, and education distinctive and worthwhile.

## Freire on Despair and Hope

In the first chapter of *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire recalls a time in his life, from the age to twenty-two to twenty-nine, when he would sometimes be "overcome by a sense of despair and sadness" (1994, p. 27). He would, he says, suffer terribly during these periods, often spending two or three days feeling "wounded, bored with the world, as if I were submerged in myself, in the pain whose reason I did not know, and everything around me seemed strange and sudden" (p. 27). He notes that this state of mind could arise without warning, in his home or his office, or on the street. He would become caught up in a world of his own, oblivious to his surroundings, unable to see friends who were passing by. As these experiences became more frequent, Freire, with the help of his wife Elza, worked hard to place them in their wider contexts. He would try to identify the elements that constituted the experience and understand them:

When I could see the depression coming, I tried to see what it was that was there around me. I tried to see again, tried to remember, what had happened the day before, tried to hear once more what had been said and to whom it had been said, what I had heard and from whom I had heard it. When you come right down to it, I began to take my depression as an object of curiosity and investigation. I "stepped back" from it, to learn its "why." Basically, I needed to shed some light on the framework in which it was being generated. (p. 28)

He wondered if his experiences were prompted by the weather or by the visits he would make to schools and families in the social service occupational role he held at that time. He found that while these factors were important in one situation, they would have no impact in another. Upon reflection, he came to see that these influences were significant not in isolation but in connection

with each other. He was involved in a process of searching that would leave a powerful mark on his existential experience and play a key part in the development of his educational theory and practice (p. 27). This process was what generated hope:

At bottom, in seeking for the deepest “why” of my pain, I was educating my hope. I never expected things to “be that way.” I worked on things, on facts, on my will. I *invented* the concrete hope in which, one day, I would see myself delivered from my depression. (p. 29)

Freire was finally able to locate the heart of his despair when the experience of rain and mud was combined with a visit to the home he had grown up in as a child. Memories flooded back to him, including the feeling of deep sorrow his family experienced when Freire’s father died. By persistently digging away at his pain, he was able to at last see it more clearly and move beyond it (pp. 29–30).

Following his exhaustive efforts to unearth the contributing factors to the pain he had felt for so many years, and to grasp the relations between these influences, he was now able to pay more careful attention to the forms of suffering experienced by others. He came to see that analysis and self-understanding were not enough (pp. 30–31). His social service work brought him into contact with some of Brazil’s poorest citizens. The people with whom he worked endured high rates of malnutrition, infant mortality, and disease, with squalid housing conditions, low levels of literacy, and limited access to health care and educational opportunities (see Freire, 1976). They labored for long hours with minimal financial compensation. These realities, Freire came to understand, were no accident; they were reflective of an oppressive social order. Addressing the forms of suffering engendered by this oppression would require both in-depth, careful, critical analysis and radical, long-lasting structural change.

From a Freirean perspective, education and hope are tightly intertwined. Both are necessary, but neither is sufficient, in fulfilling our ontological and historical vocation of humanization. Humanization, as discussed at length elsewhere (Roberts, 2000), can be seen as the process of becoming more fully human through critical, dialogical praxis. Praxis in Freirean terms is a synthesis of reflection and action. Its object is social transformation, and this includes self-transformation. As Freire points out, we are never alone, even when physically separated from others. We remain connected to the contexts,

the people, the interactions that have shaped us, and continue to work on us, as we reflect and act in any situation, any location. Descartes' dictum was "I think, therefore I am," but for Freire this is both inaccurate and incomplete. From a Freirean standpoint, our identity, our distinctive existence as individual human beings, might be better characterized in these terms: "We think, and feel, and act; therefore we are." Humanization is an ontological vocation because it is an expression of what and how we are meant to *be* as human beings. It is, however, also a historical vocation, for we can only realize our humanization through action, with others, in the world—in specific contexts, at given places, with particular purposes.

Dehumanization is the constraining of humanization, through the imposition of structural barriers—systems, practices, policies, laws—or the impeding of critical thought and dialogue. Dehumanization can be evident in the workplace, the home, the school, and many other domains of human interaction. Dehumanizing policies, practices, attitudes, and ideas, and the forms of discrimination that go along with them, often have their origins in prejudice and ignorance in relations with those who differ from us along the lines of class, gender, or ethnicity. Dehumanization, Freire acknowledged, was a reality, but this did not mean there was anything inevitable about it. There is, Freire insisted, nothing in our "natures" that propels us inexorably toward violence or discrimination or exploitation. The propensity some have to engage in these forms of human action is socially constructed. In one sense, *no one* benefits from dehumanization. As Freire makes clear in the first chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, when we dehumanize others we also dehumanize ourselves (Freire, 1972a).

As human beings, we are necessarily incomplete. We become *more* fully human, not *fully* human. It is our unfinishedness that allows us to be hopeful beings, and this is at one and the same time the basis for education. Humanization is not an end-point to be reached but a lifelong journey; one of constant searching and striving. This might be depicted as an ontology of restlessness; one can, from a Freirean perspective, never quite "sit still." This is in part because the world around us—both what we know as "nature" and the socially constructed world of systems and structures, institutions and workplaces, policies and people—is undergoing a constant process of change. As beings who reflect upon and act within that world, we cannot remain static. There will always be new problems to face, dilemmas to address, decisions to be made, and actions to be taken. As Freire sees it, we cannot "step aside" from this entanglement with the world. To attempt to do so—to maintain a

“neutral” posture—is either disingenuous or naïve. There are no neutral positions to occupy in existing as human beings; we are, from the moment we are capable of exercising reflective consciousness, *ethical* beings. Freire explains:

[M]ore than beings in the world, human beings become a *presence* in the world, with the world, and with others. Recognizing *the other's* presence as a “non-self,” this presence recognizes itself as “its own self.” It is a presence that thinks itself, that knows itself as presence, that intervenes, that transforms, that speaks of what it does and also of what it dreams, that apprehends, compares, evaluates, values, that decides, that breaks away. It is precisely in the domain of decision, of evaluation, of freedom, of rupture, of option, that ethics emerges as a necessity and imposes responsibility. Ethics becomes inevitable and the possible transgression of it an antivalue, never a virtue. (Freire, 2004, pp. 98–99).

In Freirean theory, oppression and liberation can be seen as the concrete manifestation of dehumanization and humanization respectively. Oppression, Freire argued, stands as one of the dominant “epochal themes” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Freire, 1976). We humanize ourselves, and thereby affirm our existence as hopeful, ethical beings through the epochal *task* of liberation. Despair from a Freirean perspective can be seen as both a state of mind (e.g., the depression Freire himself experienced in his twenties) and a *situation*. It is possible to describe the conditions Freire observed among the impoverished Brazilians with whom he worked in exactly this light: their circumstances constituted a situation that we should *all*, as fellow human beings, find troubling. Simone Weil (1997) talked about affliction, the dire conditions experienced by those who were desperately poor, in a similar way. The Dostoevskian principle of each of us being responsible for all, conveyed in the *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky, 1991) and taken up by one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s most influential ethical thinkers, Emmanuel Levinas (1969, 1998), is helpful here. The affliction and desperation experienced by some is simultaneously a call to us *all* to respond. As Weil (1997) observes, “[w]e have to say like Ivan Karamazov that nothing can make up for a single tear from a single child, and yet to accept all tears and the nameless horrors which are beyond tears” (p. 131). Weil adds, “We have to accept these things, not in so far as they bring compensations with them, but in themselves. We have to accept the fact that they exist simply because they do exist” (p. 131). Acceptance here is neither advocacy nor acquiescence but rather acknowledgment. For Freire, acknowledgment is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for engagement—for responding to the suffering of the other, who’s suffering is also our own, whether we recognize

it as such or not. The idea of “responding” implies that this *matters* in an ethical sense; to respond means, in one way or another, we *care*. Thus, to say that despair debilitates and traumatizes and terrifies does not mean nothing good can come of it. A situation of despair can be dehumanizing but the manner in which we respond to it can be humanizing. What cannot be defended from a Freirean point of view—and in this sense Freire is very much like Miguel de Unamuno (1972) and Elie Wiesel (Aronson, 2007)—is *indifference*.

Despair sometimes seems to be an individual “problem” that can be “fixed” with appropriate therapy or drugs, but Freire’s work suggests otherwise. Both the experience of despair and the manner in which it is addressed will always be social in nature. In Freire’s case, it was not just a process of deep self-reflection and analysis but also the involvement of Elza and the feedback he received from the workers he encountered in his educational efforts that proved pivotal in allowing him to gain something productive from his experience of despair. His despair was never merely “personal”; it was always, in one way or another, shared with others. Despair proved to be *educative* for Freire; he learned from it, developing a deeper understanding of himself, his past, and priorities in the present and future. Despair played an important role in shaping Freire’s pedagogical theory and practice, sharpening his sense of to whom and what he was committed and why. Freire’s analysis of his own despair helped him to acquire a better grasp of the limits and possibilities of education. While it is true that Freire felt he could “bury” the depression he experienced as a young man, having finally put the pieces of the puzzle together, this does not mean the process of addressing despair was over for him. For what he learned in analyzing his own situation opened up other, wider problems demanding attention—problems that would occupy him as an educator for the rest of his life.

Freire’s case is instructive in allowing us to see that despair isn’t a condition—a state of mind or a situation—that lends itself to quick and easy “solutions.” *Addressing* a situation is not the same as solving it. This distinction is important in Freire’s educational theory. In his famous critique of banking education, Freire (1972a) offers as an alternative not problem-solving education but problem-*posing* education. He does so for at least two reasons. First, the notion of posing problems accords with our vocation of humanization. We are, when granted appropriate opportunities, curious, probing, questioning beings. Rendering the world problematic is consistent with our wish to know more—to not simply accept that which has been given, either by our prior experience and understanding, or by others via political speeches, policy documents, television broadcasts, newspaper stories, and so on. The act

of posing problems awakens and extends our capacities as reflective, critical beings. Second, the problems faced by those with whom Freire worked—the extreme conditions of impoverishment described earlier—were not of a kind that lent themselves to simple, single, quick answers. Addressing these problems would be complex, time-consuming, and difficult—but no less worthy of attention for that. Freire would remind us, however, that as we reflect and act, with others, to address complex problems, the results of our transformative activity frequently throw up new problems to be addressed. This is a process that is never complete, but that should, from a Freirean perspective, not serve as a deterrent; if anything, it should heighten our sense of commitment and strengthen our resolve to continue our educative efforts.

The same point holds when we think about the ways in which we might respond to despair. Our eagerness in seeking to escape from it is indicative of both the trauma it creates, inwardly and outwardly, and the significance of the problem with which we are dealing. We don't want to experience despair because it is unpleasant, difficult, and uncomfortable. It can fill us with a sense of dread (as Kierkegaard understood), perhaps even terror. Being immersed in a state of despair can leave us feeling immobilized, humiliated, and unable to interact effectively with others. Despair disrupts, demoralizes, and sometimes destroys. Cast in this light, it is not difficult to see why despair might seem entirely negative. Nor is it difficult to understand why many of us attempt to ignore it, or suppress it, or run from it, or "fix" it (as quickly and painlessly as possible). Yet in acknowledging the intensity of the experience of despair in this manner, there is also an implicit recognition of its potential importance in realizing our humanity. In *addressing* despair, rather than trying to "solve" it, we can learn from it; we can come to more deeply understand ourselves as human beings and acquire a keener sense of what, when we poised on the very edge of destruction, matters most to us.

Despair is not infrequently defined as a state or condition in which we are "without hope." From a Freirean perspective, however, if we are without hope, we are no longer human. In a world populated by human beings, then, there are no situations that are without hope. To exist as a human being is to always retain the hope that conditions could be otherwise. (There is, indeed, some evidence of a biological basis to this; hope has played an important role in our evolution as a species: see Tiger, 1999.) As noted elsewhere (Roberts, 2013a, 2013b), it is precisely when circumstances are most desperate, when despair seems most complete, that hope comes most fully into being. Hope is given life, meaning, and significance in those very times when it seems most distant. We speak of "throwing our arms up in despair" when facing the most

complicated, difficult, traumatic situations, as if all is lost and nothing can be done. Placed in broader perspective, there are no problems that cannot be addressed in some way. Despair does not cancel out hope; it *invites* it (cf. Nesse, 1999, p. 431). When all appears well, when a situation seems least problematic, hope has no reason to spring to life. Kierkegaard (1989) recognized that even when serenity and happiness seem to prevail, despair can lurk beneath the surface. Despair need not be identified or understood to be present, and to be working on us, shaping how we construct our lives, how we conceive of happiness, how we interact with others in the world. Similarly, it might be said that we can have hope without realizing how or why or when this might be so. The possibility of hope sits waiting for situations that will allow it to do its work, fueling commitment, enabling us to rethink the problems we face and to act, with others, in transforming the world.

If we are to understand why hope was so important to Freire, we must probe further in exploring his theory of oppression and liberation. We must recall the contexts in which Freire worked. Freire's concept of hope is grounded in his ontology—his theory of humanization and dehumanization—but in his work as an educator, it was also a practical necessity. Freire's interest is not in an empty, blind, or naïve hope that ignores the brutal realities of oppression. Oppression must, if we are to pursue our vocation of humanization, be highlighted, confronted, and contested. Of course, as subsequent discussion will show, Freire's theory of oppression is not without its shortcomings and critics. Oppression is a complex, multilayered phenomenon, worthy of careful, in-depth philosophical investigation. Freire took this philosophical task seriously, and he responded to some of his critics, but did not satisfy all in doing so. One idea that binds most theories of oppression is *suffering*, and this notion is important given the focus of the present chapter. From a Freirean standpoint, the capacity to face the suffering that oppression brings is an expression of hope. Liberation for Freire is to be found not when suffering is “resolved” but in the process of struggle itself. This is both a struggle *against* oppression and a struggle *for* the development of certain human virtues, as the next section suggests.

## Oppression, Liberation, and Education

Over the last two to three decades, Freire has often been criticized for the “universalist” nature of his theory of oppression and liberation. Freire's references to “the oppressed” and “the oppressors” in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

(Freire, 1972a), it has been suggested, gloss over the multilayered, often conflicting forms of oppression experienced by people of different ethnicities, genders, and classes. Freire is seen to pay insufficient attention to questions of difference and to the specificities of particular forms of oppression. It needs to be acknowledged, for example, that a peasant man may be oppressed by his landlord but also act in an oppressive way toward his wife or children (cf. Weiler, 1991). These criticisms suggest the need for a more complex theory of liberation: one that will take into account the tensions between different oppressor/oppressed discourses and identities and avoid what some see as the disempowering effects of universalist prescriptions (cf. Ellsworth, 1989).

Freire has responded at some length to these criticisms (Freire, 1996, 1997b; Freire and Macedo, 1993). In *Mentoring the Mentor*, for example, Freire claims that questions relating to layered and multiple identities had always preoccupied him (Freire, 1997b, p. 311). He draws attention to ambiguities and contradictions he often encountered in his political and pedagogical work between different levels of oppression. He provides the example of a woman who was illiterate, suffering, as her husband and eldest son did, from an oppressive social system. She had to face an additional struggle, however, against the oppressive machista attitudes of her husband and son who tried to prevent her from becoming literate. Freire also encountered many teachers, who “while being oppressed by the political system in which they operated, were in turn oppressors of their students” (p. 311).

Freire urges readers to recognize that his work is not confined to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He notes that it would be unacceptable for him to attempt to provide “teacher-proof” answers to educational problems in contexts other than those with which he is familiar. In *Mentoring the Mentor* he refuses, as he has always done, to provide universal pedagogical recipes. In answer to the charge that his work does not address the specificities of race and gender in the U.S. context, Freire admits that he could not possibly do this without knowing that context. What he does provide, however, is “a general framework that calls for a deep respect for the Other along the lines of race and gender” (p. 309).

Freire argues that while he was always sensitive to examples of racial oppression, his primary focus in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was class oppression. It was, Freire says, precisely because of his growing awareness of the specificities of different forms of oppression (along the lines of language, gender, and ethnicity, among others) that he defended the thesis of “unity in diversity.” Freire’s concern in his later years was that while groups on the political Right

were able to forge a pragmatic unity despite tensions and differences (e.g., between economic liberalism and moral conservatism), intellectuals and activists on the Left had spent much of their time fighting each other, with often bitter theoretical wars over questions of class, gender, ethnicity, and politics (cf. Freire, 1997a). Freire maintains that what is needed is a collective struggle against all forms of oppression. In *Letters to Cristina*, he writes:

Our struggle as women, men, blacks, workers, Brazilians, North Americans, French, or Bolivians, is influenced by our gender, race, class, culture, and history, conditionings that mark us. Our struggle, nevertheless, departs from these conditionings and converges in the direction of being more, in the direction of universal objectives. Or else, for me at least, the fight would make no sense. (Freire, 1996, pp. 164–165)

There is, as has been discussed elsewhere (Roberts, 2003a), a complex relationship between universals and particulars in Freire's work. Freire's support for a position of unity in diversity (Freire, 1994, 1996, 1997a), in which differences would become a source of strength rather than fragmentation and divisiveness, has not satisfied all of his critics. By holding on, in *Pedagogy of Freedom* (Freire, 1998a) and *Pedagogy of Indignation* (2004, p. 92) to the idea of a universal human ethic, Freire retained what some see as an unhelpful and naïve modernist optimism.

Yet what binds Freire and many of his critics is the idea that liberation is tied, both theoretically and practically, to the notion of oppression. Liberation is conceived as a process of struggle against oppression—however that might be defined.

This is, in part, a recognition of the contexts in which Freire's ideas emerged. Freire's work as an adult educator was primarily in Latin American and African countries, from his original literacy programs in Brazil, to his efforts in Chile, Guinea Bissau, and other countries (see Freire, 1972b, 1976, 1978). In Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s, the disparities between different social groups were substantial, and Freire was, as an educator, confronted with extreme poverty among both the urban and rural groups with whom he worked. These extremes were still evident in Brazil near the end of the century, and in his later works Freire writes passionately about the destructive impact of neoliberalism in perpetuating such inequities. As noted previously, for Freire, oppression had become a dominant theme of the twentieth century and he was supportive, though not blindly so, of many liberation movements that emerged across different parts of the globe in response to this.

But when we pause to ask, hypothetically, what might become of liberation if oppression were removed, Freirean theory provides only some of the answers. Would liberation be necessary, or indeed have any meaning as a concept, in a world without oppression? In some respects, the question is of limited value, for we have to live in and work with the world as it is now, not as it might be in an abstract, imaginary, ideal reality. The world we have now is, as Freire and others have demonstrated, clearly one characterized by widespread oppression. Freire did not argue explicitly that oppression of one kind or another would always be with us, but neither did he suggest that a “solution” to problems of mass starvation, gross exploitation, the child sex slavery industry, and the like could be found quickly and easily. He spoke passionately about the need to address these problems, and to replace the ethics of the market with an attitude more respectful of the consequences of economic and social policies for human lives and the environment. This message comes through very strongly in later works such as *Pedagogy of Indignation* (Freire, 2004). Freire was aware, however, that there were deep structural impediments to rapid change. He remained convinced that capitalism was an “evil”—i.e., *necessarily* oppressive—system (see Freire, 1996, 1998a, 2004), and that any attempt to overcome problems such as exploitation and hunger while retaining the capitalist mode of production would ultimately be doomed to failure.

Thus, to talk of liberation in a world without oppression would be to engage in a process of speculative theorizing, ignoring the fact that we are shaped by social structures, policies, and systems. We are, Freire reminded us, beings of history and culture, influenced in ways we often cannot recognize by the traditions, practices, and beliefs of our past. We are, importantly, never fully *determined* by dominant structures, ideas and practices, past or present. But if we are to bring about change we must do so in this world, with all of its complexities and problems. Liberation thus becomes a matter both of recognizing limits and of understanding possibilities *given* those limits. This is consistent with Freire’s approach to the question of utopia. The utopian element in Freire’s thought is evident from his earliest writings and persists across his corpus of published works. Utopia for Freire arises from our unfinishedness as human beings and the hope that comes with this. Hope is not enough on its own; utopia can only come into being through searching, striving, and struggling. It demands of us that we exercise our abilities to reflect, to act, to engage in dialogue with others, and to transform ourselves and the world. Freire was concerned with building *better* worlds, not perfect worlds; he was

interested not in fantasies but in *possible* dreams (Roberts & Freeman-Moir, 2013; Torres & Noguera, 2008).

Rather than focusing on the possibility of liberation in a world without oppression, it is perhaps more productive to consider whether the Freirean notion of liberation is *merely* the process of struggling against oppression. We might accept, with Freire, that the world as it is currently structured is oppressive, in multiple ways, with different consequences for different oppressed groups. It might also be acknowledged that any robust theory of liberation must at the very least take into account the reality of oppression—in its myriad different forms. This does not compel us to make the struggle against oppression *the* defining feature of such a theory. In Freire's case, clearly this kind of human struggle is a key theme, but it is arguably not the only form of human struggling and striving Freire wants to consider and not the only key element in his theory of liberation.

As noted at the beginning of the chapter, from his earliest writings, Freire has emphasized the importance of human virtues such as love, hope, trust, faith, and critical thinking (see Freire, 1972). In later works, these virtues occupy a more prominent place in Freire's discussion of education, ethics, and politics. Freire identifies a set of what might be called epistemological virtues—scholarly or intellectual dispositions—of value in the educational process. These include an investigative and probing frame of mind, curiosity, humility, openness, reflectiveness, a willingness to question and to be questioned, a dialogical and collegial spirit of inquiry, and a desire to know (Freire, 1985, 1996, 1998b; Freire and Faundez, 1989). These intellectual dispositions complement (and overlap with) a wider set of educational virtues. Freire's later books are replete with examples of the qualities teachers should bring to bear in their work with students. He speaks in this context of tolerance, honesty, clarity, knowledge of one's subject, thoroughness, commitment, and a willingness to listen and learn from other participants in an educational setting (Freire, 1994, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c; Freire and Shor, 1987; Horton and Freire, 1990). In his later publications, Freire stressed the importance of structure, direction, and rigor in liberating education (Roberts, 2000). He also emphasized the importance of emotion as well as reason in education and human development (Roberts, 2008a). Love—of one's fellow human beings, of the process of study, and of the students with whom one works—became a key motif in his later books (see further, Fraser, 1997; Darder, 2002).

From these works, it is possible to construct a view of a certain ideal—a mode of being in and with the world, and with others—that might be said to

underpin Freire's ethic and educational theory. There is what could be called a "shadow" theory of liberation underlying his work, and particularly his later writings: a virtue-based account of human striving suggestive of criteria to which the struggle against oppression (in all of its forms) must conform if it is to be characterized as liberating. The struggle against oppression remains the dominant feature of Freire's ideal but it does not *in itself* define that ideal.

There can, then, be struggles against oppression that are profoundly at odds with the Freirean notion of liberation: they may be anti-dialogical, unreflective, lacking in love and care for others, closed to criticism and questioning, and so on. Similarly, it becomes possible to conceive of individuals and groups striving to realize the ideal—embrace and practice the virtues articulated by Freire—without self-consciously engaging in a struggle against oppression. This would not mean, however, that such people may not *be* so engaged. For, from a Freirean perspective, being dialogical, open-minded, tolerant, and so on can be seen as a form of indirect resistance against oppression.

Freire never published a book specifically devoted to this subject, nor did he refer explicitly to other bodies of work (e.g., virtue ethics, the ethics of care, and work on the philosophy of emotion) that might have been helpful in developing his ideas. Instead, as is true of many key Freirean themes, his philosophy of liberation must be drawn from a holistic, contextualized, and critical reading of his work (Mayo, 1999; Roberts, 2000, 2010; Schugurensky, 2012). Such a reading suggests a richer, more complex and multi-layered theory of liberation than some commentators have conveyed in their discussions of Freirean ideas.

Nevertheless, some significant gaps remain. In particular, Freire has little to say about the spiritual dimension of liberation and the role of practices such as meditation in the pursuit of this. In the next section I develop this theme further, with reference to the idea of a "pedagogy of great convergences." A focus on "great convergences" also allows us to consider afresh the meaning and significance of hope, and its connection with despair, in Freire's work. Such an approach, moreover, has important practical implications for contemporary education and intellectual life, as noted below.

## **Freire and a "Pedagogy of Great Convergences"**

The posthumously published work, *A Pedagogy of Indignation* (Freire, 2004), includes a letter from Balduino Andreola to Freire. In his letter, Andreola (2004, p. xliii) aligns Freire with other intellectuals, activists, and spiritual

leaders who advanced a “pedagogy of great convergences.” The people he names as examples are as follows:

Gandhi, Pope John XXIII, Martin Luther King Jr., Simone Weil, Lebret, Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Teresa of Calcutta, Don Helder, Mounier, Teilhard de Chardin, Nelson Mandela, Roger Garaudy, the Dalai Lama, Teovedjre, Betinho, Paramahansa Yogananda, Michel Duclerq, Fritjof Capra, Pierre Weil, Leonardo Boff, Paul Ricoeur, and others (pp. xliii-xliv).

This appears to be a rather eclectic mix, but what unites these thinkers and leaders, Andreola says, is their commitment to a “more human, fraternal, and solidarity-based vision for the world” (p. xliii). Andreola sees in Freire’s later written work a shift “from the West toward the East and the South” (p. xliii). He suggests that while Freire embraces the “the rigor of science and philosophy,” he is “much closer to the thinking and the vision for the world of the great Eastern masters, as well to the cosmic, mystical, and welcoming spirit of the African peoples” (p. xliii).

As has been noted elsewhere (Roberts, 2010), care needs to be taken in the way Andreola’s comments are interpreted. Freire had little to say *directly* about Eastern thought and spiritual traditions; nor did he discuss, overtly or in any detail, mysticism or meditation, in either the West or the East. It is also important to stress that there is, of course, no single, homogeneous mode of thinking, being, or acting within either Western or Eastern traditions. Any attempt to reduce the myriad, heterogeneous ways of thinking in the West to “the Western mindset” (Bowers, 1983) is deeply problematic (Roberts, 2000, 2003b). The same is true of the multiplicity of different Eastern traditions.

Andreola is right, in my view, to see something deeper in Freire’s work that binds him with many Eastern thinkers. At first glance, however, the connections are not obvious. The key is to recognize points of theoretical kinship while also acknowledging some tensions and being willing to extend ideas worthy of further development in Freire’s work. Toward that end, let me offer a few thoughts on possibilities for ongoing reflection and research.

First, we might want to ask what it is that would make this a *pedagogy* of great convergences. Not all of the people named by Andreola are, in the usual sense of the term, educationists. This does not mean their work is not *educational*. There is much that might be gained by asking what and how we learn from these “great masters of humanity” as Andreola calls them (2004, p. xliii). Do they teach us by their actions, their words, or in some other way? It is also helpful to consider how learning from the examples provided by such lives

might differ from one context to another. What might we gain from Gandhi now, in a country of the so-called “First World,” that is distinctive when compared with an encounter in earlier times and in other places? Where do ideas converge and where do they break apart?

The danger of “heroizing” such leaders needs to be kept in mind. This has, as Boler (1999) notes, been a problem in some readings of Freire’s work. The influence of the activists and thinkers identified by Andreola mustn’t blind us to their faults and weaknesses. The rigor in Freire’s work to which Andreola refers must be applied to Freire himself and to all of the others named. This is, in part, what makes this a pedagogical convergence: the very process of engaging the ideas, and of reflecting critically on the actions, of people of influence is a learning exercise. One of the first ways in which this can be done is to problematize the notion of “greatness” itself. What does it mean to be a “great thinker” or a “great leader”? What politics are at work in the elevation of some people to this status, while others—often toiling away quietly but nonetheless making a profound difference in peoples’ lives—achieve very little public recognition for their efforts? How can the voices of those who have been invisibilized be made more prominent?

Feminist and indigenous scholars have taken a lead in this area in a variety of fields within the humanities and social sciences over the past thirty or forty years, and work of this kind continues to be necessary and important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. New forms of suppression under the guise of a “war against terror” have been developed, inhibiting freedom of speech and action. Universities, supposedly the protectors of academic freedom and critical thought, have not been immune from these forms of suppression. Taking the idea of a pedagogy of great convergences seriously means, among other things, respecting the value of constructive critique. The people named by Andreola have all, in different ways, made their mark on the world by being prepared to question received wisdom, prevailing attitudes, and existing social structures. Subjecting their own work to careful critique pays homage to that work and continues the “great conversation” to which they have contributed.

One of the hallmarks of the work undertaken by many of the people named in Andreola’s list is the connection between their words and their deeds. Freire refers to this as a form of coherence—an ethical consistency between theory and practice, often easy to espouse but much harder to enact (Freire, 1998a, 2004). Freire’s conviction in this area was put to the test during the period in which he served as Secretary of Education in the municipality of São Paulo (1989–1991) (see Freire, 1993). He faced enormous challenges

in this role, with run-down schools, overwhelming poverty, and a pervasive attitude of fatalism and hopelessness among some of the people with whom he was working. That he was able to effect worthwhile changes in the administration of schooling in this vastly populated area was testament to his commitment and abilities as an educator (see O'Cadiz, Wong, and Torres, 1998), but his tenure in the role was limited and at the time at which he left there much work still to be done.

One of the ongoing tasks in building a pedagogy of great convergences will be to recognize ways in which the past converges with the present and the imagined future. As we have seen earlier in the chapter, our work as human beings is, from a Freirean point of view, never finished. There is never a time at which we can declare ourselves, or the process of education and social change, complete. Further reflection and action will always be necessary. Holding on to a "possible dream" remains more vital than ever in times of desperation and despair. The era of neoliberal reform is, for Freire, a period in human history of exactly this kind. Freire reserves his most vigorous criticism in later works (Freire, 1998a, 2004, 2007) for the politics of neoliberal global capitalism, and some of the changes he observed in the last years of his life have now become an entrenched feature of economic and social policy in many parts of the world (see further, Roberts & Peters, 2008).

This, I think, is where Andreola's list has particular contemporary significance. There is a certain orientation to ethical, political, and pedagogical questions that distinguishes Freire and a diverse range of other thinkers, East and West, from some of the ideas that have become dominant across the globe over the past few decades. The neoliberal focus on self-interest, consumption, choice, competition, and the commodification of knowledge and education stands opposed to the ideas and practices of all of the thinkers, spiritual leaders, and social activists named by Andreola. The emphasis on love, dialogue, tolerance, honesty, curiosity, open-mindedness, rigor, and political commitment in Freire's work is shared by others on Andreola's list. Acknowledging, respecting, and attempting to understand different traditions and cultures, while not necessarily accepting all beliefs or practices within them, is another point in common. These are the "great convergences" in the work of the people identified by Andreola.

What of the spiritual connections to which Andreola refers? (For the purposes of this discussion, the term "spirituality" will be used as inclusive of "religion." It is accepted, however, that this way of employing the two terms is by no means unproblematic.) Freire has, on occasion (e.g., Freire, 1985, 1997a),

commented on his religious beliefs and his relationship with the Christian Gospels. He has confessed to feeling a certain discomfort in doing so (see Freire, 1997a), but certain features of his orientation to Christianity have become clear over the years. Freire interpreted the Gospels as a call to social action. He did not ignore the notion of personal salvation altogether, but he was adamant from his earliest work as an educator in Brazil that this should be coupled with—indeed, *forged through*—the process of struggling against oppression. He spoke of love in a manner that was consistent with Christ's call to love one's neighbor as oneself. This, for Freire, implied not merely treating others as one would like to be treated oneself but acknowledging that one's neighbor *is* oneself. We are, Freire argued, always social beings, and our actions, attitudes, and beliefs are, in this sense, not merely our own but also those of others. It is, from a Freirean point of view, impossible for a human being to act, think, or *be* alone (see further, Roberts, 2000). This interpretation of the Christian gospels placed Freire at odds with the conservative wing of the Catholic Church in his native Brazil (see Mackie, 1980), but he was later to find kindred spirits among those who became known as liberation theologians.

Beyond these fairly sparse references to Christ, the Gospels, and the Catholic Church, Freire has little to say about matters of spirituality. This does not mean he has nothing to offer in this area. While a fragmented reading of Freire's work may suggest irreconcilable differences, there are arguably important connections that might be made between some traditions of meditative practice and elements of Freire's epistemology, ethic, and educational theory. For example, productive links might be made between certain forms of concentrative meditation and the process of "epistemological encircling" described by Freire in *Pedagogy of Indignation* (Freire, 2004, p. 84) and other later publications. Other quite unexpected connections can sometimes be made, as Fraser (1997) demonstrates in drawing a comparison between Freire and Taoism on the themes of love and history. Fraser shows, for instance, that there is considerable agreement between Freire and the *Tao Te Ching* on the nature of leadership and that this has significant implications for education. The comparisons can cross barriers often erected between different genres of written work. Freire's emphasis on dialogue, uncertainty, the process of struggle, and transformation, for example, is also evident in the work of novelists such as Dostoevsky and Hesse, both of whom thought deeply about philosophical and spiritual questions (see Roberts, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2012a).

Freire's occasional explicit references to spirituality in his later writings pose some intriguing questions about where his thought would have taken him had he been granted another ten years of life. For instance, in *Pedagogy of Indignation* he proclaims:

The philosophies that will help us the most will be those that, without ignoring materiality or minimizing its weight, will not timidly shy away from historical analysis and from comprehending the role that spirituality, not necessarily in a religious sense, feelings, dreams, and utopias play in the changing of reality. (p. 76)

These comments beg further questions. Freire seems to suggest that feelings, dreams, and utopia might be considered part of the “spiritual” domain, but does not elaborate on precisely why and how this is so. Nor does he say a great deal about others who have thought about spirituality in this way. The relationship between the “material” and the “spiritual” could also benefit from further exploration.

There are, then, limits to what we can gain from Freire alone. If the possibilities in Freire's work for a fruitful exploration of questions of spirituality and meditation are to be realized, Freire's ideas need to be put into critical conversation with those from other writers and traditions. The thinkers named by Andreola provide a helpful starting point in pursuing this agenda further, to which can be added many others. A pedagogy of convergences is also a pedagogy of *conversations*—across cultures, spiritual traditions, disciplinary boundaries, and time—and continuing those conversations, by expanding the list of thinkers and activists considered, is an important task for the future.

## Concluding Comments

Paulo Freire, like Miguel de Unamuno, never stopped struggling. The passion with which he expressed his opposition to neoliberalism in later works was an extension of the political commitment so evident in classic early texts such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972a). The title for one of his posthumously published books, *Pedagogy of Indignation*, was apt: in his last years, Freire continued to feel real anger, tempered with reason, at the violence done to the human body, soul and spirit by oppressive structures, policies, and practices. He acknowledged the despair associated with the forms of oppression engendered by neoliberalism but could see something of profound educational value in trying to understand and address this despair. Across his corpus of published

writings, the struggle against oppression remained one of the key features of Freire's theory of liberation. This struggle only makes sense, however, only becomes humanizing for Freire, when it is simultaneously an expression of key virtues such as love and hope.

In the last decade of his life, Freire was a prolific writer. This productivity had its weaknesses as well as strengths. In his effort to say as much as possible while facing a hectic schedule of other commitments, the quality of his writing sometimes suffered and some of his ideas warranted further analysis and development. He was always clear, however, that he was just one part of a bigger pedagogical picture. He knew the limits of his own work, just as he was aware of the limits of education. Freire saw himself as an incomplete and imperfect human being. He was a teacher, not a preacher; he never regarded himself as a guru or a savior; and he did not want the ideas he conveyed in his books to be seen as recipes or methods to be followed slavishly, regardless of the particulars of a given pedagogical context. His voice is but one among many in the ongoing struggle to build a pedagogy of great convergences—and of hope. Almost two decades on from Freire's death, the need to continue that legacy, through hard intellectual and practical work, with others, has never been greater.



## EDUCATIVE SUFFERING?

### Dostoevsky as Teacher

Fyodor Dostoevsky ranks among the most accomplished and respected figures in the history of literature. Almost a century and a half after his death, the major works for which he has become known—*The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Demons*, and *The Idiot* (Dostoevsky, 1991, 1993, 1994, 2001 respectively)—continue to be widely acclaimed for their in-depth character studies and probing exploration of hidden psychological spaces. His mature fiction is often seen as the quintessential example of philosophical writing in a literary form. Dostoevsky can be studied not just as a prose artist but as a *thinker* (Clowes, 2004; Scanlan, 2002). He has been seen as a prophet to modernity, delineating and addressing through his novels questions that would come to dominate ethical and religious debate in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Kroeker & Ward, 2002; Williams, 2008).

Getting to grips with Dostoevsky's corpus is no easy matter. His major novels are, in the best Russian tradition, extremely lengthy, multi-layered, and complex. A helpful route into his thought, however, and one that holds considerable educational promise, lies in some of his shorter works. This chapter pays attention to two such examples: *Notes from Underground* (Dostoevsky, 2004)—a novella described by Walter Kaufmann as “one of the most revolutionary and original works of world literature” (Kaufmann, 1975, p. 13)—and

“The Dream of a Ridiculous Man” (Dostoevsky, 1997), a short story published just a few years before Dostoevsky’s death.

A key theme in these two texts is the suffering experienced by their respective central characters. Examining the fictional lives of the Underground Man and the Ridiculous Man (as they have become known), and taking into account the conditions Dostoevsky himself had to endure, I argue that suffering can have educative value. Drawing on the work of the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno (and with occasional references to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche), I suggest that the genesis of educative suffering lies in the human capacity for reflective thought. Education, Dostoevsky and Unamuno show, does not necessarily make us happier; indeed, it can often lead to despair. Happiness, however, is not always what it appears to be; it can be utterly dehumanizing. The reflective consciousness that lies at the heart of suffering, and of education, is also the basis for a fuller, more complex, humanizing approach to life. Dostoevsky provides us with striking portraits of tortured souls, characters who are “ridiculous” in one way or another, often on the margins of society and sometimes prone to extremes in their thoughts, emotions, and deeds, but for whom the possibility of redemption never entirely disappears. In so doing, he allows us to appreciate something of great significance for lifelong learning: no matter how desperate our lives may be—even when we are at our lowest ebb, humiliated, lonely, and seemingly without hope—the prospect of educational growth remains open.

## From the Underground to the Ridiculous

By the time Dostoevsky came to write *Notes from Underground* in his early middle age, he had already lived a highly eventful life. Having enjoyed great success at a very young age with his first novel, *Poor Folk* (Dostoevsky, 1988), he was later arrested for his involvement with the Petrashevsky Circle, a utopian socialist group, and spent the best part of a decade in prison and compulsory military service in Siberia. Released from his confinement, he published a fictionalized account of his experiences in *Memoirs from the House of the Dead* (Dostoevsky, 1983). Among the other works that followed was *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* (Dostoevsky, 2008), based on his observations during a trip to Europe. From his European travels, Dostoevsky had developed a strong suspicion of a new form of thinking taking hold in a number of countries: a nihilistic, utilitarian individualism, built on the principle of self-interest

governed by reason. Those advancing this mode of thought as the basis for social reform in Russia were known as “rational egoists.” The most prominent representative of this group was Nikolai Chernyshevsky.

Chernyshevsky’s book, *What Is to Be Done?* (Chernyshevsky, 1989), was beginning to have a profound impact on Russian consciousness, and Dostoevsky, through *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions* and then *Notes from Underground*, sought to challenge this (Frank, 2010). In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky mounts his critique by indirect means. In Part One of the book, he has his narrator, the Underground Man, address Chernyshevsky and his fellow rational egoists merely as “gentlemen,” while pulling apart their philosophy. In Part Two the Underground Man describes three sets of events that, collectively, help to explain how and why he has formed the position conveyed in Part One.

The Underground Man troubles the comfortable assumptions about reason that he sees as central to rational egoism. He argues that while reason may allow us to comprehend certain things, it is insufficient on its own to account for all human action. We often act against what is presumed to be in our best interests; to this extent, we might be seen as irrational. As human beings we have wants that cannot be denied, and willing is as important as reason in motivating us to act. We seek not merely to be happy but sometimes to suffer, just so that we can feel truly alive. Our thoughts, feelings, and actions are not always predictable, and our lives can never be fully planned. We should, the Underground Man suggests, want not just to exercise our capacity for reason but to realize, in a more rounded and complex way, our full individuality as human beings.

These ideas are complemented by the Underground Man’s account, in Part Two, of three pivotal episodes in his life. The first involves his convoluted plot to avenge an officer who has moved him aside in a humiliating manner in a bar. The Underground Man decides to bump into the officer on a public walkway, not giving way, and thereby reasserting his control. He prepares thoroughly for this event, executes his planned actions (the officer, it seems, not even knowing who he is), and expresses a sense of satisfaction in doing so. The second event is a dinner with a group of former school acquaintances, all of whom the Underground Man despises, and none of whom have any respect for him. Ignored or treated with contempt throughout the evening, the Underground Man oscillates between fury and despair, his companions all the while enjoying themselves in unreflective, drunken merriment.

The third episode emerges from the second. Devastated by his treatment at the hands of his school fellows, the Underground Man nevertheless follows them

to a brothel where they have gone to round out their evening's activities. He finds on his arrival that they have already departed, but meets Liza, a prostitute, and begins a conversation with her. He gives a bookish speech on love, goodness, and the evils of her trade, and seeks to extract a delayed, second-hand revenge on his colleagues by manipulating her emotions and reducing her to tears. Full of remorse for his actions, he implores Liza to visit him in his underground apartment. She does so, and he is again compassionate and cruel by turns, sitting alone at the end of his tale, ruing the hurt he has both suffered and caused.

The reach of *Notes from Underground* has extended well beyond academic and literary circles. The book has been adapted under its own name for film and theatre, and the influence of Dostoevsky's text can also be detected in other movies such as *Taxi Driver* (Swensen, 2001) and *Leaving Las Vegas* (Stenberg, 2000). The Underground Man has served as a frequent reference point in discussions of character types, both fictional and non-fictional. He has become a cultural archetype: a model for other depictions of alienated outsiders. *Notes from Underground* has also been seen as a precursor to some of the classic dystopian works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Orwell's *1984* (Wanner, 1997).

"The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" was published in 1877 and provides perhaps the best concise representation of Dostoevsky's mature ethical thought. The story appeared just prior to Dostoevsky's work on *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky, 1991) and crystallizes many of the themes explored at far greater length in that influential novel. One of Dostoevsky's most respected interpreters, Konstantin Mochulsky, sees "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" as "wondrous and unique in its genre." For Mochulsky, this short work "brilliantly culminates Dostoevsky's utopian conceptions" (cited in Leatherbarrow, 1995, p. xxii). The story has been adapted for the screen, with a BBC production featuring Jeremy Irons as the Ridiculous Man, and in both its style and content it foreshadows some of the key elements of what would, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, become known as fantastic realism.

"The Dream of a Ridiculous Man" begins with the central character contemplating suicide, feeling that, given his ridiculousness, it would "make no difference" what he did. Having put off the deed for some time, he determines that this night will be the one to end his life. His thoughts that evening are temporarily disrupted by an incident involving a small girl, who comes up to him on the street desperately seeking assistance (for an ailing parent, he surmises). He is also bothered by noise in the apartment adjoining his own. He tries to regain his focus on the act of suicide, for which he will use a revolver, but ends up falling asleep.

He dreams that he kills himself. He is placed in a coffin and then removed from it by an unknown force. He is transported thousands of kilometers across space, landing in due course on a planet that bears a remarkable resemblance to Earth.

This “other Earth,” resplendent in its beauty, turns out to be populated by a group of people who exist in total harmony with each other and who live at one with nature. They are supremely happy, innocent, and free in their natural state, finding no need for laws or science. Having come over a substantial period of time to know them and to appreciate the peaceful nature of their existence, the Ridiculous Man, by his own confession, corrupts them all. As the years go by, all the vices exhibited on his own Earth begin to appear: people start to argue and to fight; they covet what they feel they do not have; they deceive each other. Divisions now emerge between different individuals and groups; religion, hitherto unnecessary, is invented; and new languages develop. People suffer greatly, declaring nonetheless that they embrace this pain and would not want to do without it. They seek knowledge, where before they had been content to simply accept things as they found them.

The Ridiculous Man, wracked with guilt for the damage he has done, requests of his companions that they crucify him. They refuse to do so, but come increasingly to view him as mad. Deeply saddened, and with removal to the madhouse likely, the Ridiculous Man awakens with a start. He now views the revolver as abhorrent, and, far from wanting to kill himself, wishes to go on—to find the little girl he failed to help, and to preach his message to all who will listen. The key to all of human existence, he has come to see through the revelation of his dream, is to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Understand this, he has come to believe, and we will have the basis for addressing all of our deepest social problems. As the corrupted inhabitants of the other Earth had taken on all the faults with which he had been so familiar on his own Earth, but also struggled against these tendencies, he had realized that his love for his companions, now “human, all too human” (Nietzsche, 1996), had become greater than ever. He carries that overwhelming feeling with him as he re-enters the waking world and becomes determined, irrespective of how he will be viewed by others, to share what he has learned.

## **Consciousness, Suffering, and Education**

The idea of suffering was central to Dostoevsky’s thought. His own life was filled with horrors that would have broken many other writers. He endured

ill health, poverty, and imprisonment. His difficulties had a serious impact on those closest to him, who had to deal not only with his epilepsy and emphysema but also the disastrous financial consequences of his gambling addiction. As he grew older, the burdens associated with his increasing writing fame also weighed heavily on him. In a letter in April 1880, he noted: “[my life] goes on in such a disorderly fashion and even turmoil that I really very rarely belong to myself” (Dostoevsky, 1964, p. 307). He felt frustrated that he could not convey all he wanted to through his work, and that his critics, even those who praised him, often failed to understand him. They “spoke of me in so superficial and facile a manner,” he said, “that they seemed not to have noticed at all what I gave birth to with so much pain in my heart and what poured out so truthfully from my soul” (p. 308).

In his later years, Dostoevsky was placed under severe pressure by his workload and ill health. In replying to one correspondent, he declared that if ever there was a man condemned to hard labor, it was him. Even his experiences as a convict prisoner, he claimed, were more tolerable than those he was enduring while writing *The Brothers Karamazov*. He would sit, he said, literally writing “day and night,” unable to answer the many letters and requests sent to him, with no time to read books or newspapers, or even to talk to his children. “My health too is bad,” he adds; “[y]ou can’t imagine how bad. The chronic catarrh of my respiratory organs has turned into emphysema—an incurable disease (breathlessness, not enough air) and my days are numbered” (pp. 324–325). “[T]erribly tired” and with his nerves “in a shocking state” (p. 326), he despairs:

I have literally not a free moment even for my most sacred and most pressing duties: I am terribly behind-hand with everything, I have neglected everything, not to mention myself. It is dark now, six o’clock in the morning, the city is awakening, and I have not yet gone to bed. My doctors tell me that I must not overwork, that I ought to sleep at night and not sit for ten or twelve hours bent over my writing desk. Why am I writing at night? Because as soon as I get up at one o’clock the doorbell starts ringing: one man comes to ask for one thing, another for another, a third comes with some demands, a fourth insists that I should solve some insoluble “cursed” problem for him as otherwise he would be forced to shoot himself. (And I have never seen him in my life before.) Then a student delegation arrives, followed by . . . women students, schoolboys, charitable societies—to read something for them in a public meeting. What time is there left for me to think, to read, to work, to live? (pp. 325–326).

These features of Dostoevsky’s biography provide an important contextual backdrop to both the texts under examination here. For rather than viewing

Dostoevsky's achievements as remarkable given his suffering, it is possible to see them as very much a *consequence* of the troubles he experienced. Dostoevsky would not have been the writer he was without the extreme challenges he faced. In his life, as in the lives depicted in *Notes from Underground* and "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man," lessons can be learned about the potentially educative effects of suffering. Dostoevsky also shows that education *promotes* suffering, but in a manner that can be justified. Education, far from making us happy, can unsettle and disturb, leaving us uncomfortable and unhappy. This, however, is precisely the point—and we must sometimes accept that there may be no "escape" from such suffering. This does not mean nothing positive can from our experiences of this kind; we can learn from and through suffering (Chen, 2009, 2011; Jardine, McCaffrey, & Gilham, 2014; Ozolins, 2003). The philosophy of Miguel de Unamuno provides a helpful framework for understanding the origins and consequences of the suffering that is connected with our existence as conscious beings.

As we saw in chapter 2, Unamuno's principal concern is with what he sees as the tragic sense of life (Unamuno, 1972). The tragic nature of our existence, according to Unamuno, lies in the fact that the very form of consciousness that makes us distinctive as human beings—reflective, temporal consciousness—brings with it both a desire for immortality and the knowledge that we are *not* immortal. Our longing for immortality, for permanent being, drives our quest to know; yet in knowing, we come to push ourselves ever further towards death. The quest to know is in the first instance at the service of the instinct of self-preservation, and to this extent is life-giving, but reason born of reflective consciousness also becomes the basis on which life is undermined.

Our capacity for reflective thought, once developed, will not leave us alone. It opens up new possibilities, expands our understanding of ourselves and the world around us, but we cannot simply "switch it off" at our convenience. "Consciousness is nature's nightmare," as E.M. Cioran puts it (Cioran, 1995, p. 102). We must retain a sense of being ill at ease, uncertain, never fully content. The reflective mind never stops, and we can never quite predict where it will take us. Our thoughts and feelings as reflective beings can plague us like a disease, but, Unamuno maintains, we deny them at our peril. The suffering engendered by reflective consciousness, and in particular our awareness of death, is at the same time the wellspring for our renewal. It is "out of the abyss of the sense of our mortality, that we emerge into the light of another heaven" (p. 47). What at first glance appears most distressing is, in the end,

fortifying. The answer to existential angst is not to flee from it but to face it, not in an aggressive and confrontational way but with openness, humility, and curiosity.

Unamuno's wish to retain his consciousness overrides the thought of even the most harrowing pain. The idea of nothingness, he confesses, has always terrified him more than the prospect of Hell. Indeed, for Unamuno the very idea of nothingness is itself Hell. To suffer is still to live, and in living there is hope (p. 49). Faced with arguments that purport to prove the absurdity of belief in eternal life, Unamuno is unmoved: "they are reasons and no more than reasons, and one does not feed the heart with reasons." "I do not want to die. No!" declares Unamuno (p. 51). More than this, though, he does not *want* to want to die. For Unamuno, then, in these matters at least, reason must be subservient not only to feeling but to the will. Unamuno is also forthright in claiming: "I am the center of my Universe, the center of the Universe;" from this standpoint he stresses, "I want to live, this poor I which I am, the I which I feel myself to be here and now, and for that reason I am tormented by the problem of the duration of my soul, of my own soul" (p. 51). Aware that such a stance may open him up to charges of egoism, Unamuno observes:

There is nothing more universal than the individual, for what becomes of one becomes of all. Every man is worth more than all Humanity. Nor is there any point in sacrificing each to all, save in so far as all sacrifice themselves to each. What we call egoism is the principle of psychic gravity, the necessary postulate. "Love thy neighbor as thyself," we were told, on the presupposition that each man loves himself, so that it was not necessary to say: "Love thyself." And yet, we do not know how to love ourselves. (p. 51)

Our purpose in life, Unamuno suggests, is to create ourselves. The desire to preserve the self we create, to keep it for all time as it is and not as a mere shadow, is not pride but honesty. To talk of living principally for truth, goodness, and beauty, as if these ideals could be separated from our longing for immortality, is nothing but vanity and hypocrisy (pp. 52–53, 58). Just as Unamuno questions the notion of knowledge for its own sake, so too does he have little time for the idea of "art for art's sake"; for Unamuno, *all* forms of human inquiry and endeavor are ultimately connected to the same underlying drive for self-preservation.

As beings embedded in time we undergo a constant process of change, but reason, in seeking to construct a sense of identity within the flow of continuous becoming, focuses on that which remains the same (Dienstag,

2006, p. 126). This results in a kind of cognitive marginalizing of that which changes. Yet, “[i]f reason did not focus on the ‘genera,’ then consciousness would erase itself—there would be no self with ‘continuity in time’; this is the animal condition” (p. 126). Dienstag elaborates:

The ability to perceive the genera as genera (that is, to hold identity constant over time) is just what consciousness is. But to Unamuno, this means that what is genuinely individual and alive is “strictly speaking, unintelligible.” The only being that ceases to change is one that is dead. The “death” that truly concerns Unamuno, then, is not the one at the end of our lives but the death-in-life that consciousness creates at every moment. So reason and life, rationality and vitality, are housed together unhappily in one body, perpetual antagonists, both owing their existence to time-consciousness. (p. 126)

For Unamuno, the human being is, in Dienstag’s words, a “house-divided”: “trapped between reason and life, between heaven and earth” (p. 126). This perpetual tension must be maintained, for if we could dwell exclusively on either side, life would become unbearable: “If we could truly give up the hunger for immortality, we would lose the will to live. Reason alone cannot provide one. . . . If, on the other hand, we gave ourselves over entirely to faith in immortality, we would lose our humanity. . . . Pure faith would be too akin to an animal’s instincts: unwavering, unquestioned—and thus unreflective, inhuman, and pathetic” (p. 127).

Unamuno allows us to consider the experiences of the Underground Man and the Ridiculous Man in a fresh light. The Underground Man describes himself as a sick individual, and much of the story he proceeds to tell does little to dissuade us from sharing this assessment. From what form of sickness does he suffer? There is a physical element to his illness, as the Underground Man himself notes at the beginning of his tale, but what ails him most is his tortured inner life. In Part One of *Notes from Underground*, he demonstrates a powerful capacity for reason, doing so, ironically, while arguing against reason (Roberts, 2012b; Scanlan, 2002). He realizes that reason is the source of his misery but he cannot reason himself out of this. Each of the significant others he encounters in the events described in Part Two of the book are more strongly aligned with the “life” side of Unamuno’s divided house, albeit in differing ways. The officer is the person of action—someone who simply gets on with job; the school fellows luxuriate in unreflective pleasure, the concerns of others barely registering on their collective radars; Liza is the embodiment of simple love, demonstrating care seemingly beyond reason. The Underground

Man, with his hyper-consciousness, cannot participate in their world; they, with their less well developed reflective capabilities, cannot enter his.

The Underground Man is a deeply unhappy individual. In this respect, Dostoevsky appears to present us with a clear contrast in the people the Ridiculous Man finds when he lands on the other Earth in his dream. The inhabitants of this paradise seem to be supremely happy—but what kind of happiness is this? It is of the kind Iris Murdoch (1983) alludes to in her novel *The Philosopher's Pupil*. Nearing the end of a walk during which they have addressed a wide range of ethical and metaphysical questions, two characters in the book, Father Bernard and the philosopher John Robert Rozanov observe a young man, Tom McCaffrey, enjoying a playful scuffle with his friend, Emmanuel Scarlett-Taylor. “There’s a happy man,” suggests Father Bernard; “Happy because innocent; innocent because happy” (p. 198). The people encountered by the Ridiculous Man in his dream are, in their pre-corrupted state, “innocent” and this, the story implies, is a pre-condition for their happiness. Unlike the Underground Man, they are entirely lacking in cynicism. They do not sneer at others, become envious of them, or seek to undermine them. They do not question themselves or their social world; instead, their attitude is one of unadulterated acceptance. Consistent with the comments in Murdoch’s novel, the inhabitants also *create* a state of innocence through their spontaneous expressions of joy and love. In a sense, they “inoculate” themselves from despair, producing through their everyday thoughts, feelings and actions a kind of shield against critique.

Viewed in the light of Unamuno’s ideas, there is something profoundly disturbing about this state of affairs. The pre-corrupted inhabitants of the Ridiculous Man’s other Earth, while basking in joy and peacefulness, are also “inhuman” (in the specific sense described by Dienstag). They are *all* life, with no critical—that is to say, reflective, reasoning, separating, temporal—consciousness. Kierkegaard (1989) would say that they lack an awareness of their own despair, and that this is itself a form of despair (p. 53). However, in their post-corrupted state, the other Earth dwellers embrace their suffering and through this they realize their humanity. Suffering, Cioran (1998) argues, is “insidious;” once tasted, it will be actively pursued. Suffering “exhausts mystery or renders it luminous” (p. 39). To *be human* is to suffer (cf. Ozolins, 2003), and this is also the starting point for the process of education.

A clue to understanding this is provided in the text itself. The Ridiculous Man notes, seemingly to his surprise, that had it been possible for those he corrupts to return to their previous innocence and happiness, they would have refused:

They used to answer me: “Granted we’re deceitful, wicked, and unjust, we *know* that and weep for it, and we torment ourselves over it, and torture and punish ourselves perhaps even more than that merciful judge who will judge us and whose name we do not know. But we have science, and through it we shall again find the truth, but we shall now accept it consciously, knowledge is higher than feelings, the consciousness of life is higher than life. Science will give us wisdom, wisdom will discover laws, and knowledge of the laws of happiness is happier than happiness.” (p. 315)

Dostoevsky appears to want to critique the views conveyed here, yet he is not fully convincing in doing so—and perhaps *deliberately so*. Dostoevsky’s conscience was, as Aileen Kelly (1988) puts it, “divided,” and the tensions in his mind are manifested, time and time again, in the consciousnesses of his characters. There is no doubt that he was highly critical of emerging “scientific” ways of understanding the world, as expounded by rational egoists among others. At the same time, he was not a supporter of a kind of naïve naturalism that would somehow deny the reality of “The Fall” engendered by the development of human consciousness. He may not have believed that knowledge would always be for the good but neither did he diminish its potential importance in enhancing human life. Dostoevsky recognized that to become more deeply conscious of oneself—to gain self-knowledge, and thereby to become educated—was not a path to happiness, but this does not mean it cannot be humanizing. We suffer and stumble as we learn, he and his characters demonstrate, but this also allows us to embrace more of what human life has to offer. The next section elaborates on this point, with particular reference to the educative possibilities in certain forms of “madness.”

## **Sanity, Sickness, and the Fullness of Life**

Like Kierkegaard (1989) and Nietzsche (1990), Dostoevsky was the prophet of a new mode of being, borne out of a passionate commitment to life. While the Underground Man might be criticized on many levels, he is in no danger of becoming lifeless, apathetic, or indifferent. He struggles, shouts, rebels, collapses into tears, releasing streams of vitriol one moment and lyrical outpourings on love the next. He may, for much of the time, be confined to his hovel under the ground, but he never sits still. He has, albeit to an extreme degree, exactly the kind of never-quite-comfortable consciousness Unamuno sees as central to our lives as human beings. He wants, as does Unamuno, to retain his own distinctively individual consciousness, no matter what, even

if this flies directly in the face of reason and brings great pain. He wants to *go on*, to keep creating himself, even after facing the most humiliating of events.

The Underground Man's inner life is all movement, and this is also one of the key features of education. A commitment to education implies a willingness to live with a certain restlessness—a restlessness that can drive us “mad.” Education implies a loss of stillness, and with this a loss of innocence. The Underground Man is anything but indifferent himself and he detests indifference in others. The officer's apparent indifference provides the prompt for his elaborate bumping plan, and the cruelty he exhibits in his relations with Liza is in part a reaction against the humiliation of being ignored by his school fellows. He simply does not *matter* to (most) others, and this is infuriating. The Ridiculous Man's feigned indifference at the start of his tale is, by the end of his dream experience, converted into its very opposite: absolute commitment. Where previously his existence was itself the problem, as he perceived it, now the possibility of not existing presents itself to him as his very reason for his being. He wishes to exist not just to preserve something of himself but for the message of love he wants to convey to others. Unamuno might say that his expressed wish to kill himself was a denial of his underlying drive to live on, and that this impulse ultimately shone through—not just at the end of his dream but in his inability to end it all in his real life.

Kierkegaard (1989) suggests that a person “who says without pretence that he despairs is ... a little nearer, a dialectical step nearer being cured than all those who are not regarded and who do not regard themselves as being in despair” (p. 56). The Underground Man, for all his faults, distinguishes himself from others in this respect. He lives in *self-conscious* despair. He is aware of his own shortcomings and failures but also has some knowledge of his distinctive strengths. His “wickedness” is a psychological illness but this is simply a manifestation of a deeper ailment: a profound sense of being out of kilter with others and with the world. In Kierkegaard's (1989) terms, he can be seen as existing in despair over both wanting to be himself and not wanting to be himself. He *chooses* to rebel against the rigidity of systems, the restrictions of reason, the solidity of a brick wall, and to this extent he is the author of the self he creates. This is a self that is awkward, anti-social, and destructive, to be sure, but it is also, in some respects, more authentic than most of the other selves he encounters.

Long before Foucault's seminal work on madness and civilization, Dostoevsky showed that “sanity” and “insanity” are socially constructed. (Indeed, Foucault refers to Dostoevsky in his Preface to *Madness and*

*Civilization*: Foucault, 2001, p. xi.) All of Dostoevsky's most memorable heroes and anti-heroes are "ridiculous." They suffer, to an exaggerated degree, the consequences of the disease to which Unamuno referred: reflective consciousness. Among Dostoevsky's characters, the Underground Man and the Ridiculous Man are among the most explicit in acknowledging their own sickness. Indeed, this is the Underground Man's opening pronouncement in his tale. The Ridiculous Man, too, stresses from the beginning that others view him as mad; by the end of his story, he has accepted this. With characters of this kind, Dostoevsky turns the mirror back on us as readers of his work (Roberts, 2013c). As Cox observes:

In so far as literary comedy has an authentic didactic purpose, that purpose is achieved by making the reader aware of the tension between his inclination to laugh at the ridiculous behavior of others and his equally strong tendency to behave in a way which others may very well find laughable. In this sense, the function of comedy is not simply to "ridicule a lack of self-knowledge" in others, but to nudge the reader into a somewhat greater knowledge of himself. (Cox, 1980, p. 107)

Dostoevsky's works are not just the confessions of his characters; they are also his confessions—and *ours* (see also, Roberts, 2008b). By reading Dostoevsky, then, we practice the art of confession, not necessarily with religious overtones but more in educational terms. To "be confessed" through the act of reading is, over time, not so much to purge ourselves of "sins" but rather to engage in a painful process of examining that which remains within. There may be no obvious "release" through this process; only deeper self-understanding. Indeed, part of the understanding a reading of Dostoevsky fosters is the knowledge that much within us will never change. In many respects, we are little different from Dostoevsky's ridiculous characters. We are *all* "mad," but like Dostoevsky's Ridiculous Man and Underground Man, there is also considerable sanity in what we do.

Sanity, from a Dostoevskian point of view, should not be judged solely by the extent to which our actions are guided by reason, for, as Unamuno argued, reason too can be the agent of madness. Sanity is, rather, connected with a sense of wholeness. This is, in part, a matter of examining the interplay between reason, emotion, and willing and the need for harmony between these faculties. Or, to put this in Unamuno's terms, it has to do with maintaining both that which is vital—life giving—and that which separates, creating distance between ourselves and the world we seek to comprehend. But it is also connected with the roles we play in the wider world—with the relations

between human beings and the purposes fulfilled by individuals in interaction with others. From this perspective, the Ridiculous Man can, by the end of his tale, be viewed as a model of sanity. If we take his vision seriously, he can be seen—and Dostoevsky intended it in this light—to have beheld a simple truth that has always been there but which is so easily forgotten. The insanity, he would want to say, lies in our inability or unwillingness to acknowledge that truth—the need to love one another—and bring it to life in our everyday actions and interactions.

One of the principal “positive” messages to emerge from both *Notes from Underground* and “The Dream of the Ridiculous Man” is the flip-side of the outsider motif: Dostoevsky shows us in these writings, as elsewhere in his corpus, that *we need each other*. This notion, so often trivialized and robbed of its deeper meaning, is simple in expression but complex in its conceptual contours and realization. Jean-Paul Sartre (2007) says: “I cannot discover any truth whatsoever about myself except through the mediation of another. The other is essential to my existence, as well as to the knowledge I have of myself” (p. 41). Dostoevsky’s characters resist and shout and rage against the world and the others they encounter, but they need them nonetheless. They are all, each in their own way, *lonely*. This is true of the Underground Man, the Ridiculous Man, and many others who seek most fervently to avoid being integrated with “the herd” (Nietzsche, 1990): those who are less independent in spirit, less free thinking, less able to say “yes” and “no” and assert themselves as willing beings. At the very times when Dostoevsky’s tortured souls rebel most strongly, they cry out that they need others. This is the state the Underground Man finds himself in as he seeks tacit approval from his school fellows—despicable as they are to him—and then from Liza, the prototypical “fallen woman” so often elevated in Dostoevsky’s fiction to angelic status. The Ridiculous Man too claims repeatedly that it “makes no difference”—no difference what he does in the world, what others think of him, what will become of those others—but is clear that he is anything but indifferent. He desperately wants to be wanted; to feel a sense of purpose and fraternity with others.

We are, Dostoevsky wants to say, *social* beings, and we cannot escape this fact even as we assert, in the most aggressive terms, our individuality and right to stand apart from the crowd. This does not mean that Dostoevsky subsumes the individual within the social or that he denies the distinctive human personality a special place in his ethic. To the contrary, he was clear about the dialectic involved here, as his reflections in *Winter Notes on Summer Impressions*

(Dostoevsky, 2008), published just prior to *Notes from Underground*, show quite plainly. In *Winter Notes*, he argues that commitment to the ideal of brotherhood—of unity through fraternity, care, and love—is simultaneously the highest expression of individuality. Dostoevsky recognized that we depend on others and are shaped by them; yet he, like Unamuno, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, also wanted to uphold, and vigorously so, the role of individual creativity. The Underground Man asserts his right to deny even the most apparently indisputable mathematical truths. He wants to retain his right to bump into a brick wall, fully aware of the impossibility of getting through it. He asserts the need to sometimes suffer, when the usual path is the easier and more comfortable one. He needs others, but he will not be reduced to them. His aggressive opposition to rational egoism in Part One can, in part, be explained by the social and educational influences described in Part Two, but he is also *more* than the product of those influences.

## Final Thoughts

Dostoevsky's characters, and Dostoevsky himself, teach us that conceptions of educational development are not to be trusted if they paint a picture of steady, happy upward progress. We might accept that change occurs—in life all is movement—but, in reading Dostoevsky, must acknowledge that this is full of tensions and contradictions and “backward” as well as “forward” steps. Education, conceived as the process of formation (as in the German notion of *bildung*), needs to be reinterpreted in the light of the examples given by Dostoevsky in characters such as the Underground Man and the Ridiculous Man. A Dostoevskian approach to education stands opposed to the linear, outcomes-based constructions of learners and learning that tend to dominate policy discourse. It also rubs against any psychological model of education that emphasizes development through ordered, sequential stages, each with their own measurable behaviors and attributes.

Dostoevsky shows us what is wrong with these dominant ways of thinking by depicting human beings “living on the edge”—on the margins of society, on the brink of insanity, in the throes of desperate daily struggles. His characters often act in extreme ways: they make bizarre statements, have strange thoughts, oppress themselves and others cruelly, experiencing great rapture one moment and utter despair the next. Some, such as Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoevsky, 1991) and Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*

(Dostoevsky, 2001), are “holy fools;” others, such as Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* (Dostoevsky, 1993) and Stavrogin in *Demons* (Dostoevsky, 1994), commit hideous crimes (the abuse of a child in the case of the latter, and double murder in the case of the former). They respond, at times, with exaggerated offence to the actions or words of others. A number (Kirillov in *Demons*, Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and many others), unable to bear the pain or pointlessness of their lives, take the final step and commit suicide.

Dostoevsky’s characters are outsiders—strangers, we might say, but not altogether unlike us, and this is, in part, what allows them to speak to us so powerfully. An encounter with “strangers” or “strangeness” can be educative (cf. Greene, 1973; Roberts, 2015). As we read Dostoevsky, we are forced, if we are the reflective beings Unamuno believes us to be, to turn the mirror back on ourselves, asking whether we are really so different from the miserable creatures he portrays. We may, of course, be far less extreme in our thoughts, feelings, and actions than many of Dostoevsky’s troubled souls, but we often suffer as they do, experiencing deep existential anxiety and finding no relief in education. Indeed, education can contribute to our suffering, prompting painful reflection on the muddled events of our lives, on our shortcomings as well as strengths, and on the challenges that still lie ahead of us. Becoming educated in this manner can be a disturbing, sometimes deeply traumatic, experience—but we are, as Dostoevsky shows, not alone in this process, and an encounter with others who suffer, in fiction as in “real life,” can make a difficult pedagogical journey more bearable.

## PAIN, PLEASURE, AND PEACEFULNESS:

### An Educational Journey

Literature has much to offer in contemplating the idea of an educational journey. Nowhere is this more evident than in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* (Hesse, 2000a), a classic tale of a man who, in his search for fulfilment, moves through a range of different modes of life. Along the way, Hesse's title character experiences pain, pleasure, and—finally—a kind of peacefulness. He makes mistakes, learns from them, and continues to grow and develop as a human being. In these respects, *Siddhartha* conforms to the German tradition of the *bildungsroman*, as exemplified by novels such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* and Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (Swales, 1978). The *bildungsroman* is a novel with a distinctively educational focus, but “education” here must be interpreted more broadly than processes or systems of teaching and learning in formal institutions such as schools. It is “learning from life” with which the *bildungsroman* is concerned (cf. Laverty, 2014). Education in this sense is best understood as a process of *formation*. *Siddhartha*, in common with other novels in this tradition, allows the reader to see how the title character thinks, feels, and acts, alone and with others, in a manner that contributes to his educational development. In this book and others, however, Hesse “complicates” the *bildungsroman* as a literary genre, demonstrating, for example, that transformative learning often does not proceed in a smooth, linear, progressive way (see Hesse, 2000b; Peters, 1996; Roberts, 2008c, 2012a). Indeed,

*Siddhartha* invites us to consider whether we can truly learn *anything*. The book problematizes conventional notions about the nature and value of teaching, and prompts us to rethink the goal of pursuing knowledge. I analyze the educational journey depicted in *Siddhartha* under the three headings signaled by the title of this chapter: pain, pleasure, and peacefulness. Drawing on the philosophy of Simone Weil, I argue that a pivotal element in Siddhartha's development is *attention*: it is in learning how to attend to himself, to others and to the world around him that Siddhartha comes to appreciate the importance of both suffering and joy.

## Pain

In the first chapter of *Siddhartha* readers are introduced to a Brahmin's son, Siddhartha, who is loved by everyone. Siddhartha is intelligent, attractive, and athletic, seemingly destined for greatness. Yet, Siddhartha himself is not happy. He has a thirst for knowledge and a restless mind. He senses that the ritual ablutions, sacrifices and supplications to the gods will not be sufficient in seeking to understand himself, his inner essence. A group of shramanas pass through his city and he decides, against his father's inclinations, to follow them. He is joined by his dearest friend, Govinda. Siddhartha immerses himself deeply in the ascetic practices of the shramanas, eating sparingly, fasting regularly, scorning the pleasures of the material world. He develops but a single goal: "to become empty, empty of thirst, empty of desire, empty of dreams, empty of joy and sorrow." He seeks to "die away from himself, no longer to be 'I,' to find the peace of an empty heart, to be open to wonder within an egoless mind" (Hesse, 2000a, p. 12). Under the guidance of the oldest shramana, he learns to meditate and to project his mind into countless other forms, living and dead. He learns to suffer and to overcome pain. Yet, as often as he takes flight from his ego, he always returns to it and he finds himself once again locked into the agony of existence. He confesses to Govinda that he sees little difference between the shramanas and those who turn to drink, or to sexual gratification or gambling: each achieves only a temporary escape from the ego, from the pain of living. Not even the oldest and wisest of the shramanas, he believes, has reached nirvana.

Siddhartha and Govinda hear of an exalted, perfect being—Gotama, the Buddha—and take their leave of the shramanas. Arriving in the city of Shravasti, they learn of the Buddha's whereabouts, find him, and observe

his actions and manner. Siddhartha is captivated by him, regarding him as a man who is truly holy, someone to be venerated and loved. Siddhartha and Govinda listen, absorbed, as Gotama speaks. They learn that life is suffering but that if the path of the Buddha is followed, liberation from this pain can be attained. Govinda is utterly convinced by what he sees and hears, and elects to become a disciple of the Buddha. Siddhartha, again, is not fully content. He meets Gotama, expressing his profound admiration for his teaching while nonetheless drawing attention to what he sees as a gap, a flaw: an exception, in the form of the liberation espoused by the Buddha himself, to the otherwise unbroken unity of all things. Gotama listens with care to what Siddhartha has to say before cautioning him about the limits of opinions. The goal, Gotama stresses, “is not to explain the world to those who are greedy for knowledge”; rather, it is to overcome suffering (Hesse, 2000a, p. 27). Siddhartha adds some further thoughts, to which Gotama responds with a warning about the dangers of excessive cleverness. Siddhartha’s respect for the Buddha remains intact but he realizes that he cannot become his follower; cannot be seduced by the teachings of even this most venerable of men.

## Pleasure

After departing from Gotama’s grove, Siddhartha reflects deeply on his life to date. He becomes aware that his journey so far had been devoted to the process of trying to overcome or dispense with his ego, but in this he had failed: “I could only trick it, could only elude it, could only hide from it,” he concludes. The fact was that his ego, more than anything else, was the object of his inner attention, and yet he had come to learn little about himself—about what it was that made him distinctive as a human being. He was, he comes to appreciate, afraid of himself, seeking atman or Brahman, tearing his ego apart to find something underneath, and in the process losing himself. He resolves to become his own student, and he begins to see the world afresh, appreciating the beauty of his surroundings instead of dismissing them as merely the false world of appearances.

This decisive moment signals the start of a new phase in his life. He meets a ferryman who unbeknownst to Siddhartha will later play a crucial role in his life. The ferryman takes Siddhartha across the river, happy to waive any fee for his services, noting that “everything comes back again” and that Siddhartha too will return one day (Hesse, 2000a, p. 40). Siddhartha arrives at a village,

where he meets a beautiful woman: Kamala, a courtesan. Stirred by her, he resists his desires at first, but later asks Kamala to serve as his teacher in the art of lovemaking. Kamala advises Siddhartha to improve his appearance. When she asks him what he can do to obtain the money necessary to buy new clothes and shoes, he replies: "I can think, I can wait, and I can fast" (Hesse 2000a, 45). In response to Kamala's incredulous reply, he adds that he can also compose poetry. He trades a poem for a kiss, and in time finds that his other abilities too are of considerable value. With advice from Kamala, Siddhartha seeks out a rich merchant, Kamaswami. Initially skeptical, the merchant quickly comes to see how much Siddhartha has to offer, and Siddhartha proves highly adept in the world of business. He remains, however, largely indifferent to the financial rewards it brings. Neither the prospect of wealth nor the pleasures of the flesh are sufficient to satisfy him. Having awakened senses that had slumbered during his earlier years, he falls prey to a compulsive gambling habit, becoming ever more mired in a destructive cycle. He has, he realizes, become tired, sick, and old. Now in his forties, he cannot help noticing his greying hair. Receiving a warning in a dream, he moves on again, unaware that he is leaving behind a Kamala who is pregnant with his child.

## Peacefulness

Feeling complete disgust with himself and the world from which he has come, Siddhartha arrives once more, after the passing of so many years, at the river where he had first met the ferryman. From the deep recesses of his past, a word emerges in his mind: "Om," the most sacred of all sounds. He falls into a deep, dreamless sleep. After leaving Kamala, he wanted to disappear, to die. Now, with the river rushing beside him, he feels rejuvenated. He sees a monk nearby and soon realizes that it is Govinda. At first, Govinda does not recognize Siddhartha but when the latter reveals his identity, the two friends quickly become reacquainted. They learn that they have both been wanderers, in their different ways. Through his fortuitous reconnection with Govinda, Siddhartha, in casting his mind back across his whole wandering life, comes to see that all his experiences, even the most repulsive and difficult, were necessary. He is now open to where ever his path will take him.

He meets once more with the ferryman, by now much aged, and asks to be taken across the river. Like Govinda, the ferryman does not initially recognize Siddhartha, whom he had first encountered two decades earlier and who is

now wearing the fine clothes of a city businessman. At Siddhartha's request to stay on as a helper, a moment of recognition occurs. The two men give each other their names, Siddhartha learning that his new companion is called Vasudeva. Living by the river, they develop a steadfast friendship, sharing only a few words. Years pass, Siddhartha becoming ever more attuned to the river and its significance for him. One day, Kamala, who has long since given up her old life and devoted herself to the Buddha, appears again before Siddhartha, though only fleetingly. She has been travelling with her son—Siddhartha's son—to see Gotama, who is dying, and along the way is bitten by a snake. This incident occurs not far from the crossing point by the river, and shortly thereafter Kamala collapses near the hut where Vasudeva and Siddhartha live. Vasudeva carries Kamala to the hut, and there Siddhartha comes face to face with his son for the first time, the boy (also called Siddhartha) instantly rekindling a forgotten memory. Seeing the unconscious Kamala, Siddhartha immediately recognizes his former lover. The two have time for only a brief exchange of words before Kamala dies.

Siddhartha finds himself responsible now for a son he never knew he had. He allows the boy to mourn, but soon becomes aware that his eleven-year-old son has led a privileged life, with expectations of good food, a comfortable bed and servants at his disposal. Admitting to himself that it would be unreasonable to expect the boy to suddenly accept him as his father, or to be content with the meager rations he could provide, Siddhartha tolerates the trouble his new charge brings. Siddhartha the younger responds with scorn to his father's kindness. As the boy grows older, he comes to resent his father's patience, goodness, and piety. In a fit of anger over a small request from Siddhartha to gather some brushwood, he screams words of hatred at his father. The boy storms off, and Siddhartha is left to experience the pain of love, a wound that burns while his friend Vasudeva retrieves him and takes him back to the hut.

Siddhartha turns to the river in seeking to understand his pain, finding some of the answers he needs but discovering at the same time that Vasudeva's days are numbered. Siddhartha speaks to his friend about things he had never discussed with him previously. Vasudeva, as always, listens attentively. Siddhartha begins to feel as if, in unburdening himself to Vasudeva, he is speaking not just with Vasudeva but with something eternal. Vasudeva counsels Siddhartha to listen even more closely to the river. Images of his father, of his son, of Kamala, all appear before Siddhartha. Listening more intently than ever before, Siddhartha hears all the voices, all the suffering and striving, all the pleasure and pain, merging into one sound: Om. Looking at his friend

Vasudeva, his struggle ceases. Vasudeva tells Siddhartha that he has been waiting for this moment for a long time. He says his farewell to Siddhartha, the hut, and the river, and dies.

Siddhartha's story closes as it had begun: with Govinda at his side. Govinda, by now an old man much respected by the younger monks, but still restless and searching, hears of a ferryman who has become a sage. He seeks out this wise man, meets him, and the two see in each other their respective natures as seekers. As in their previous meeting, Govinda does not immediately recognize Siddhartha. The latter observes that perhaps Govinda is one who seeks so much that he does not find. Seeking, he says, "means having a goal, but finding means being free, open, having no goal" (Hesse, 2000a, p. 108). Siddhartha reminds Govinda of how he had found him many years ago, and Govinda is filled with surprise and delight to rediscover his old friend in front of him—a friend who has changed not only in his physical appearance but in his vocation and bearing. Siddhartha invites Govinda to sleep in his hut for the night. The next morning, Govinda seeks guidance from his friend and is at first perplexed by the answers he receives. As their discussion progresses, he is finally able to focus fully on Siddhartha, finding himself transfixed. Siddhartha has that same slight, peaceful smile Govinda had seen many times before on the Buddha. No longer sure if time exists, Govinda bends down to his friend, tears running down his face: "A feeling of most profound love and most humble veneration burned like a fire in his heart. He bowed low, down to the ground, before the motionless, sitting figure whose smile reminded him of everything he had ever loved in his life, of everything in his life that had ever been worthy and sacred for him" (Hesse, 2000a, p. 117).

## Suffering, Attention, and Education

In *Agamemnon*, the first of the three tragedies in the ancient Greek classic *The Oresteia*, Aeschylus introduces the concept of *pathei mathos*: learning through, or being taught by, suffering. He makes it clear that this is a process from which there is no escape: Zeus set us on the path to wisdom, Aeschylus says, when he established the law that suffering alone should be our teacher. Aeschylus suggests that even while we sleep, pain continues to grow. We have memories and we feel fear. We learn "unwillingly," the grace of the gods coming to us through violence (Aeschylus, 2003, p. 51).

These ancient thoughts resonate with the ideas advanced by several of the thinkers considered in this book—including Kierkegaard, Unamuno, and Dostoevsky—but they are particularly prescient in considering the work of Simone Weil. Weil, as we saw in chapter 3, speaks of grace becoming evident only after great suffering. In one of her aphorisms, she has this to say about “Suffering, teaching, and transformation”: “What is necessary is not that the initiated should learn something, but that a transformation should come about in them which makes them capable of receiving the teaching” (1997, p. 135). As is the case for Aeschylus, there is a connection with the divine: “*Pathos* means at the same time *suffering* (notably suffering unto death) and *modification* (notably transformation into an immortal being)” (p. 135). Like Aeschylus, she also links suffering and grace with violence. And just as for Aeschylus the experience of suffering seems to be incessant, for Weil the key is time: “Time does us violence,” she says; “it is the only violence” (p. 134). Weil continues: “All problems come back again to time. Extreme suffering: undirected time with no direction: the way to hell or to paradise. Perpetuity or eternity” (p. 134).

Weil, as an intellectual successor to Aeschylus (in the specific senses indicated above), also allows us to address the themes of pain, pleasure, and peacefulness as these feature in *Siddhartha*. Weil maintains that “pleasure and pain are inseparable companions” (p. 134), and this observation is borne out by the fictional experience of Hesse’s central character. Siddhartha only comes to truly appreciate the deep, simple pleasures of life after experiencing great pain. Pain for Siddhartha is not something that occurs all at once; instead, it is encountered again and again as he experiments with different modes of life. The young Siddhartha doubts whether he can learn anything, and he is certainly wary of those who profess to be able to teach others. But the mature Siddhartha has a quiet, calm awareness of having learned *something*, even if he cannot, and would not want to, define exactly what that is. Vasudeva teaches him, gently but persistently, by his own example, allowing his actions to speak more insistently than would be possible with any words. The intermingling of pain with pleasure is captured in Siddhartha’s connection with the river, which grows deeper, more mysterious, with every passing year in his older adulthood. The river functions as both a metaphor—for the ebb and flow of life, with all its complexities—and a constant physical presence in Siddhartha’s later years. For Siddhartha, there is ultimately no separation between himself and the river. It might be said that he has a living relationship with the river, but this does not convey adequately the

nature of his experience. By the end of his life, he feels that he is the river and the river is him. In that river, as in Siddhartha, there is joy and sorrow, exhilaration and disappointment, knowing and not-knowing, restlessness and peacefulness.

Siddhartha, like his creator Hermann Hesse, is a restless soul. (For a comprehensive account of Hesse's life and its connection with his work, see Mileck, 1978.) For much of his adult life, Siddhartha is never able to stay in any one place, occupy any one role, for more than a few years. He is, as Paulo Freire would say, never quite as certain of his certainties as his friend Govinda and is always less willing to believe in gurus and all-knowing teachers than others he finds on his journey. In common with Miguel de Unamuno, he has a burning desire to probe the mysteries of life and death, and he can never find satisfactory answers to his questions in any established doctrine. Siddhartha discovers, as did Unamuno, that what is most vital in life defies rational explanation. In the river, he finds a source that is pulsating with life, always flowing, always changing, carrying much along the way; yet, this very movement, the constant that serves as an anchor for Siddhartha, also signals ephemerality and impermanence. The river allows Siddhartha to place his life experiences—all the pain and pleasure, all the deprivation and excess, all the searching and striving—into perspective. It also teaches him to *slow down*, as Hesse himself would have counseled (Arzeni, 2009). Through his connection with the river, Siddhartha is able to better appreciate the importance of key events, periods, and relationships in his life without becoming excessively and unhelpfully attached to them. He does not fully “let go” of them; rather, he becomes more *accepting* of them.

The key element in Siddhartha's educational development is *attention*. As we saw in chapter 3, this notion is central to Weil's philosophy (see Weil, 1997, 2001a). Weil, it will be recalled, speaks of attention as a process of “suspending” thought, leaving it open to that which it is facing. To pay attention, we must learn to wait. Attention is a form of concentration, but this must not be forced. We cannot be too eager, impatient, or anxious. If we are to find anything worthwhile through attention, we cannot be too concerned to seek it out. Attention demands of us that we be ready to receive, ready to accept. Attention is a form of quiet, inner obedience. With attention, comes gratitude. Weil's concept of attention poses a gentle challenge to many of our conventional assumptions about education. Developing the quality of attention is not a matter of accumulating knowledge, or of demonstrating this via tests or examinations. Indeed, for Weil, the knowledge we believe we have acquired can be an impediment to attention. It is not that Weil undermines

the value of subject specific learning; to the contrary, as she demonstrated in her performance as a student, she was committed to rigorous and thorough investigation, whatever the field of study. Her point is, perhaps, that existing knowledge can cloud our judgments, or predispose us to a certain way of thinking, and thereby inhibit the sense of relative detachment that is necessary for genuine attention. The overriding goal in all study, whatever the subject area, is the development of attention. There is, from Weil's perspective, no one domain of knowledge that has an exclusive preserve over this capacity. Moreover, our ability to pay attention may not be immediately evident but might only reveal itself slowly and at a later stage in our lives.

Attention as Weil conceives of it is not merely an epistemological orientation but a mode of moral participation in the world. To pay close attention to someone in need, someone afflicted, is in Weil's terms a moment of extraordinary significance—a manifestation of a human capacity for caring that is, in its fullest expression, rare and difficult to develop. Attention of this kind is neither pity nor indifference. It is a turning toward one's neighbor—a fellow human being, an individual rather than an abstraction—with a willingness to listen to what he or she has to say, or to see what he or she has to show. The appropriate posture in such circumstances is one of humility, with minimal attachment to one's own concerns, and this is by no means easy to cultivate. "In the intellectual order," Weil maintains, "humility is nothing more nor less than the power of attention" (1997, p. 182). Humility as Weil understands is not something that can be simply turned on and off like a switch. As we saw in chapter 3, the kind of humility Weil has in mind emerges through a process Weil calls "decreation" and this can be utterly harrowing. It will often involve living very much on the edge, with the desperation that comes from feeling there is no relief to our difficulties. Decreation opens up the void that allows the ego to retreat and our capacity to attend to others to unfold.

Attention develops slowly and painfully in Siddhartha's life. In taking the decision to join the shramanas, he is largely oblivious to the suffering this causes his father. After announcing his intentions and encountering resistance from his father, Siddhartha stands fixed in place all night as a quiet but insistent demonstration of the strength of his conviction to leave. In the face of this determined stance, his father gives in, but not without experiencing great inner turmoil. He paces back and forth, unable to sleep, and looks silently at his son, "his heart filled with anger, filled with concern, filled with uncertainty, filled with pain" (Hesse, 2000a, p. 9). It is only years later, when his own son leaves him, that Siddhartha is able to appreciate what his father

had gone through when he departed to join the ascetics. As a young man, Siddhartha does not have the maturity to pay proper attention to his father. He wants to rid himself of his ego by joining the shramanas but he is unable to go through the process of decreation necessary to see what is nearest at hand. His time with the shramanas teaches him a great deal but his desire is still to escape from suffering. He learns how to overcome pain but not how to attend to it and to accept it. He cannot yet see that the pain of existence is part of what gives the process of living its meaning and significance.

The approach taken by Gotama too, as Siddhartha interprets it, is to focus on overcoming suffering. Siddhartha neither wholeheartedly accepts nor fully rejects the Buddha's views. His decision not to follow Gotama is based more on uneasiness with following *anyone*, with embracing *any* one set of ideas handed down by someone else. In this sense, he finds himself in an ambivalent position when his stance is considered in the light Simone Weil's ideas. Weil, like Siddhartha, was always reluctant to become a "follower." She reflected deeply on questions of spirituality but she was unable to bring herself to join any church. She would never have been comfortable with simply accepting a doctrine because it was associated with a venerated figure. Yet, as noted above, she did speak of becoming ready, through a process of transformation that would typically involve much suffering, to receive that which is taught. Weil cautions against the potential dangers of "intelligence" and "imagination" as distractions in the development of attention. In Hesse's story, Gotama likewise sounds a warning about excessive cleverness in the path to liberation. Siddhartha, it might be argued, has something to teach the Buddha or at least the Buddha's followers about the risks of unquestioning adherence to a way of life; yet he also has much to learn about resistance and acceptance. He is at this stage in his educational journey still too much the rebel. He is too quick to reject the teachings of others, assuming with all the arrogance of youth that he has little to learn from them. He is, as Weil would say, not yet capable of receiving the teaching that is available to him.

Siddhartha's subsequent experiences collectively contribute to the process of deep transformation to which Weil refers—and create the state of readiness that is necessary to accept the gift of teaching. Over time, he learns the difference between teaching and *teachings*, even if he does not articulate his development in quite this way. Throughout his life, he encounters many teachers, all of whom play their part in forming the human being who is finally at peace with himself by the river. Putting the ego in its rightful place is not, as he appears to believe his younger days, a matter of simply taking flight

from it. Siddhartha's focus in adopting the ascetic mode of life is still very much on *himself*. Reducing the influence of the ego is, however, also a matter of realizing, with humility, how important others are in shaping our lives. It may be true, as Siddhartha intuits, that we must each forge our own distinctive path in seeking fulfilment or liberation of whatever kind. But a distinctive path is never one that is built alone. We are, as Paulo Freire stressed, *social* beings and even when we are physically alone we remain connected to others through the roles they have played in shaping (not *determining*) our thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and values. Those others *live through us*, even if only indirectly. Siddhartha works on his readiness to receive the teaching Kamala has to offer through his lovemaking with her. He learns to consider the needs and desires of another human being, unsteadily at first but with growing confidence as he pays attention to Kamala's movements and words and silences. It is neither Siddhartha himself nor Kamala alone who can bring the teaching she has to offer into being; rather, this must emerge through the day-to-day particulars of the relationship between them.

At one point in his youth, Siddhartha claims, in conversation with Govinda, that "[i]t is impossible to learn anything." "That thing we call 'learning,'" he says, "does not exist" (Hesse, 2000a, p. 7). His experiences later in life suggest otherwise. Siddhartha's proclamation needs to be contextualized. He goes on to indicate that learning, "wanting to know," works against atman, a form of knowing "that is everywhere, ... in me and in you and in every being" (p. 16). It might be granted, then, that what he is questioning is not learning *per se* but a specific type of learning. Later textual evidence suggests his target is "words that come to us from teachers" (p. 19). Learning as he conceives of it is tied to doctrines: to words spoken or written by one person, or a group of people, and passed down in some fashion to others. His claims here seem to be contradictory. On the one hand, he maintains that learning does not exist; on the other hand, he appears to identify it with our quest to know. It can be inferred from his remarks that he wants to contrast two different types of knowing—the ineffable, all-knowing, ever-present atman that pervades everything, and the more "ordinary" process human beings undergo in seeking knowledge—but this still leaves some ambiguity about what he means by learning. Present in his thinking is both the notion of learning as a noun (something that can be named as a body of knowledge) and the concept of learning as a verb (the process of learning). He is critical of both the process of striving to know and of the knowledge being sought.

Regardless, in examining the course of his life, it is evident that learning of a certain kind *does* occur. He learns not only from many of the human beings with whom he comes into contact on his journey (his father, the shramanas, Govinda, Kamala, Kamaswami, Vasudeva, and his son) but also from the world of nature (the river, the ground he walks on, the sun and the stars, and so on) and from socially created phenomena (e.g., the workings of commerce). He can reject the very idea of learning when he is young because he still has so much *to* learn. He also has much to learn about the process of learning itself, and this demands attention (cf. Altobello, 2007; Wallace, 2006). In his youth he is neither sufficiently aware of what he has already learned nor able to adequately comprehend what he does not yet know. The relative peacefulness he attains in the last phase of his life is, in part, a reflection of his deeper understanding of the strengths and limits of his own knowledge. He can pay closer attention to himself—his thoughts, feelings, and actions—as well as to his surroundings and the other people with whom he interacts. He remains an unfinished being, but having gone through the painful process of lifelong transformation, he has a more complete grasp of why incompleteness is necessary. He is still mistrustful of teachings but he has much *to teach*, as his dear friend Govinda realizes. He teaches through speaking but also through *not* speaking. From one of his own great teachers, Vasudeva, he has learned the art of listening—and of *showing*, through his actions, rather than merely *telling* through his words.

Hesse remains true to the form of the *bildungsroman* in depicting Siddhartha's journey as a process of educational development through time. But he also encourages us to reconsider how time works on us as educational beings. Weil talks about the violence done by time, and this is evident in the fictional life of Siddhartha. During his years with Kamala and Kamaswami, when his mode of existence is most “worldly,” time operates like a crushing force upon him. It holds him captive, locking him in to a perpetual cycle where what was pleasurable becomes painful. Indeed, the pain is so great that Siddhartha, full of self-loathing and disgust with his way of life, wants to end it all. This is, in part, a fighting back against time; an attempt to “defeat” it. Yet, just as he peers into the darkness “beyond” time, his suffering at its most acute, the goodness that has always been there reveals itself to him. Siddhartha has undergone the process of decreation described by Weil:

But still this journey was good, and still the bird in my breast did not die. But what a journey it was! I had to pass through so much ignorance, so much vice, such great

misunderstanding, so much revulsion and disappointment and misery—just to become a child again and start over. But it was right. My heart affirms it. My eyes laugh upon it. I had to experience despair, I had to sink to the level of the stupidest of all thoughts, the thought of suicide, in order to be able to experience grace, to hear OM again, to sleep properly and to be able to awaken properly. (Hesse, 2000a, p. 75)

## Conclusion

The title character in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* undergoes a complex, multifaceted, lifelong process of educational development. He does so through his experimentation with a range of different modes of life. His educational journey brings him both pleasure and great pain. He engages in a constant process of searching, even as he recognizes the suffering this involves. He has questions from a young age that never find complete answers. The relative peacefulness he finally experiences is built on a form of acceptance that embraces all his uncertainties, his longings and frustrations, his sorrows and his joys. The key in enabling this state of being to emerge is *attention*: to himself, the people he encounters on his way, and the world he inhabits. The French thinker Simone Weil helps us to understand why attention is so vital to our growth as educational beings. Hesse's attention to the subtleties of character formation—the words uttered, the actions taken, the relationships forged, the thoughts and emotions experienced—allows us to see the importance of teaching and teachers, even as his central character appears to undermine those influences on his development. There is much that contemporary readers might gain from paying attention to the fictional life of Siddhartha created by Hermann Hesse. Like Siddhartha, we may find that the mysteries of learning, teaching, and knowledge can never be fully solved. But with repeated readings of the book, and quiet meditation on the insights it has to offer, we can deepen and extend our understanding of our own distinctive educational journeys.



## COMPLICATING THE CURRICULUM:

### Happiness, Despair, and Education

Over the last two decades a booming industry in “happiness” has emerged. Conceived as a “new science” (Layard, 2005), academic research on happiness has attracted widespread media attention and spawned a host of more popular publications, many of which have a “self-help” flavor. The field of study most influential in these developments is known as Positive Psychology. Positive Psychology focuses on good health rather than illness; it emphasizes strengths instead of weaknesses; and it promotes the cultivation of a form of authentic happiness that will enable people to realize their potential for “lasting fulfillment” (Seligman, 2002). The term “well-being” (or, more precisely, “subjective well-being”) is now sometimes preferred over “happiness,” but the sentiments remain the same: the aim is to develop attitudes, abilities, and activities that will enable students to feel better about themselves and others, flourishing as individuals in an environment where positive, optimistic thinking prevails.

These developments have particular relevance for ongoing, complicated scholarly conversations over education and the curriculum. Ideas from Positive Psychology have found their way into educational theory, policy, and practice, with books and programs devoted to the teaching of happiness in schools (e.g., MacConville & Rae, 2012; Morris, 2009). The point of this

chapter is not to undermine the potential value of such programs, or to mount a comprehensive critique of Positive Psychology. Rather, in the company of other philosophers of education who have engaged contemporary discourses on happiness (e.g., Cigman, 2014; Gibbs, 2014; Miller, 2008; Noddings, 2003; Smeyers, Smith & Standish, 2007; Smith, 2008; Suissa, 2008), I want to continue a conversation that has a long history—and raise a few questions that might give us reason to pause for a moment's further reflection.

In the Western world it is usually taken as given that we all want happiness, and our educational arrangements tacitly acknowledge this. No national or regional curriculum policy document ever declares that a key goal for the country's education system is to make students unhappy. Yet, if the ideas explored in this volume have any truth to them, this proposition is not as outrageous as it might seem at first glance. I have argued that education is meant to create a state of discomfort, and this may lead to unhappiness. This chapter suggests, however, that it does not have to be a case of either/or: a worthwhile educational life can include both "happiness" and "unhappiness," both hope and despair. The first part of the chapter situates contemporary discourses on happiness in their broader contexts. The second section returns to Dostoevsky, and to other thinkers considered throughout this book, in addressing happiness, unhappiness, and despair from an alternative point of view. The final section explores some of the pedagogical implications of these ideas.

## Contextualizing Happiness

As earlier chapters have suggested, the assumption that happiness should be the primary goal for all can be questioned. Psychology exerts a disproportionate influence over popular conceptions and discussions of happiness and well-being. Psychological perspectives clearly have much to offer, but other disciplinary traditions are also important. There is, for example, a substantial body of contemporary philosophical work on happiness, with antecedents that date back more than two-and-a-half-thousand years, in both the East and the West (see, for example, Ahmed, 2010; Belliotti, 2004; Bok, 2010; Bortolotti, 2009; Bruni, Comin & Pugno, 2008; Ivanhoe, 2013; Kupperman, 2006; McMahan, 2010; Miller, 2010; Noddings, 2003; Russell, 2012; Tiberius, 2013; van Deurzen, 2013; White, 2006). The notion of happiness is addressed, directly and indirectly, in the ancient Eastern writings of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism; in the West, we are indebted to Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and

many other thinkers (Aristotle, 1976; Chuang Tzu, 2006; Confucius, 1979; Lao Tzu, 1963; Mencius, 2004; Plato, 1974; The *Bhagavad Gita*, 2003; The *Dhammapada*, 2005). For early Western philosophers, the question of happiness was not merely a theoretical matter but an intensely practical one; philosophy was very much a “way of life” (Hadot, 1995). Proponents of Positive Psychology often acknowledge these deep philosophical roots. It is not uncommon, for example, for reference to be made to the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia* in distinguishing a “subjective well-being” account of happiness from other approaches (see Teschers, 2013; note also that the translation of *eudaimonia* as “happiness” can be misleading: see Nussbaum, 2003, p. 32). But the focus is still on happiness as an individual psychological state. This is not to suggest that the social realm is ignored; to the contrary, doing good for others will frequently be seen as one of the surest paths to happiness. The point is, however, that it is still the self-contained, self-determining individual who is to become happy here, and it is taken as given that all individuals *want* and *ought* to become happy. The pursuit of happiness becomes part of a wider narrative of continuous self-improvement, the basis and means for which are seen to lie in science. Psychology itself is seen as an improvement in this respect from philosophy, with its findings, claims and recommendations grounded in data rather than mere speculation, analysis, or argument.

It is also important to consider the wider contexts for the emergence of a happiness industry—the “happiness turn,” as Sara Ahmed (2010, p. 3) describes it. Several trends have converged to make this moment in human history ripe for the flowering of such discourses. The dominant paradigm for economic and social policy reform in the Western world over the last three decades has been neoliberalism, at the heart of which lies a view of human beings as self-interested, perpetually choosing, autonomous individual consumers (Roberts & Peters, 2008). Under neoliberalism, an ethos of competition prevails, and the model of the market is advanced as the ideal in structuring a society. Knowledge has become a commodity, to be traded in the same manner as other goods and services. The language of “brands” is now commonplace. Even individual human beings are sometimes recast in this light and the assumption is that those who have a sufficiently high profile in the entertainment industry, or in sport, or in politics, will make the most of their “brand” in creating economic opportunities for themselves. At the same time, within educational circles, there has been a move toward so-called “evidence-based” reform in schools in other institutions. The emphasis has been on “what works,” as determined by rigorous scientific research. Educational psychology

is presumed to have more to offer in contributing to this body of evidence than historical, philosophical, or sociological domains of educational inquiry. More broadly, we live in an age where there is an obsession with measuring, managing, and monitoring almost everything (cf. Biesta, 2010). Individuals, whether they work in the corporate sector or in institutions with a cultural or educational focus, are expected to *perform* and the extent to which they do so is measured by periodic “performance reviews.”

These trends have been extensively criticized but they continue to exert a powerful influence over politicians and policy-makers. Under such circumstances, the turn to happiness, within and beyond the educational sphere, is not surprising. Happiness, as an idea and an ideal, lends itself well to marketing. If someone has the “answer” to the question of how we attain eternal happiness, who wouldn’t want to obtain this? Obtaining the answer, in today’s world, means *paying* for it; or at least that is the logic conveyed, explicitly or implicitly, by those who have something to gain by “branding” and “selling” happiness. Given its ready appeal as something we are all supposed to want, happiness becomes even easier to sell if claims about its importance are backed by the authority of science. This applies not only at the individual level but also in relation to groups, regions, and countries. One nation can now, on a supposedly “scientific” basis, be compared with others in league tables that purport to measure happiness. This can fuel the competitive ethos that drives contemporary neoliberal, global capitalism, with political leaders seeking to position their countries as high as possible on such tables, just as they might compete for prominence in international indices of economic performance.

The desire for happiness, whether this is innate or constructed, can also be harnessed to reinforce attitudes and actions consistent with the ephemerality of our times. We live in a throw-away age, where nothing is permanent, where quick-fix solutions are sought for complex problems, and where long-term thinking is discouraged. In those parts of the world where citizens are surrounded by electronic devices, most of which are switched on 24/7, paying careful attention to any one activity for a sustained period of time becomes very much the exception rather than the norm. This is especially so where the task is particularly difficult or demanding. The move in educational institutions, as in popular media such as television (including the news and other current affairs programs), is toward shorter bursts of entertainment. The goal is to keep students or viewers happy; discomfort should be avoided wherever possible. And where this breaks down, and students or viewers become bored,

or restless, or angry, those who provide the teaching or the programming are punished with lower ratings and, where necessary, appropriate disciplinary action.

The effective marketing of happiness as a commodity has a self-sustaining logic, with both “failure” and “success” as key elements. If we are all encouraged to believe that happiness should be our principal goal in life, and if this encouragement comes in an environment where “performance” is everything, failure to achieve what we seek can send us back to the market to purchase more of it. If, despite our efforts, we continue to fall short in attaining happiness, we might develop a kind of “performance anxiety,” a situation that could call for a further financial commitment to therapy designed to “fix” the problem. We may find ourselves expecting to be “up” all the time, allowing little or no space for emotions typically seen as “negative.” If we appear too serious, or sad, or depressed, or in despair, this becomes another matter for scientific investigation and resolution.

Those who fail to conform to the “happy, happy, happy” *modus operandi* may be cast as “pessimists,” a term that now carries an almost universally pejorative connotation. There is no uncontestable reason why this needs to be so, as Joshua Deinstag observes in his insightful book on the pessimistic tradition:

Why is it that pessimism, once a respectable if not popular philosophy, has become so despised in our culture that the word “pessimist” can be used today as term of political and intellectual abuse? Look at any American newspaper for a few days and one will immediately see that this is true. It is enough to label an idea (or a person) “pessimistic” in order to be allowed to dismiss it (or him) without further discussion as irrational, emotional, indefensible or, worst of all, unpatriotic. (Deinstag, 2006, p. ix)

Deinstag continues:

Why should this be? After all, an expectation that things will go badly is not, on the surface, any more or less rational than an expectation that things will go well. An extended examination of the question could well yield a judgment in favor of the one or the other—but the label is used precisely to foreclose such an inquiry. Pessimism is dismissed before serious debate begins, not during or afterward. (p. ix)

With this unreflectively dismissive attitude toward pessimism, whole bodies of work have been seen as unworthy of serious consideration, including existentialism, psychoanalysis, critical theory, and, most recently, postmodernism. Whether the label “pessimistic” is appropriate in each or any of these cases

is not the key point; the question is why a label of this kind works so well as a weapon of dismissal. In part, Deinstag argues, it is a case of shooting the messenger. Miguel de Unamuno, to whom Deinstag refers in his book, is also helpful here:

Nothing is to be gained by bringing forth those ambiguous words “optimism” or “pessimism,” words which often come to mean the opposite of what their user intends. To label a doctrine as “pessimistic” does not denigrate its validity, and neither are “optimistic” doctrines more effective for action. I believe, on the contrary, that many of the greatest heroes, perhaps the very greatest, have been despairing men and that they carried out their feats from desperation. (Unamuno, 1972, p. 144)

We have, Unamuno maintains, always attempted to place logic at the service of our desires, including the most fundamental desire of all: our wish for immortality. Thus, in the Middle Ages, we witness the harnessing of human logic for theological ends, a process Unamuno sees as a form of advocacy or special pleading. It is our desire for immortality that drives the need to provide a rational account of God’s existence but this, for Unamuno, is a misuse of reason. We want an explanation for that which defies explanation. Theology is fundamentally dogmatic; it proceeds from that which is given, becomes law and cannot be questioned. “True science,” Unamuno claims, “teaches us, above all, to doubt and admit ignorance; advocacy neither doubts nor believes it does not know. Advocacy requires a solution” (p. 104).

The impetus that gives rise to the need for a solution is also evident in the tendency among some theological advocates to warn of “baneful consequences.” Unamuno points out that whether a doctrine has baneful consequences or not has no bearing on the truth of that doctrine. Those who issue such warnings confuse, or deliberately but misleadingly identify, truth with goodness. This amounts to nothing more than “pious desire” (p. 104). The same thinking can appear under the guise of happiness, conceived as a necessity for human beings—that is, as something not merely desirable but part of the truth of what it means to be human. This is again a case of special pleading, where something that provides comfort is falsely converted into a claim about truth. A more honest response, Unamuno might say, would be to simply confess that one wants or seeks happiness because it makes one feel better to do so, just as in relation to faith, one might say “I believe because it consoles me to do so” (p. 104). The confusing of truth with desire identified by Unamuno is apparent in more contemporary contexts as well:

[P]hilosophers who have written in these traditions have often presented a bleak picture of human existence and thereby offended modern sensibilities. But of course the authors of these images do not *celebrate* such a situation; they simply consider it their duty to call attention to it. Critics have often mistaken a depiction of the world for a *choice* about our future, as if philosophers had rejoiced at the decline or decay that they described. But this is like deriding scientists who warn of global warming because their models give apocalyptic predictions. Do we normally assume that such scientists want their predictions to come true? (Deinstag, 2006, p. x)

There is no necessary connection between pessimism and unhappiness. Many who form part of the pessimistic tradition of thought also make much of the joy of life. One can adhere to a broadly pessimistic view of the human condition and value life all the more for that, discovering happiness in ways that might otherwise not be found. As Camus (1968) puts it, “[t]here is no love of life without despair of life” (p. 56). Simone de Beauvoir (1948) observes that “the most optimistic ethics have all begun by emphasizing the element of failure involved in the condition of man.” “Without failure,” she says, there can be no ethics, “for a being who, from the very start, would be an exact coincidence with himself, in a perfect plentitude, the notion of having-to-be would have no meaning” (p. 10). E.M. Cioran, too, is adamant: “The more I read the pessimists, the more I love life” (Cioran 1995, p. 101). There is much that can still be learned from the Stoics (Aurelius, 2011; Epictetus, 2014; Seneca, 2007, 2010), who argued for a position of reasoned fortitude in the face of troubling circumstances. We don’t have to accept the Stoic concept of a rational order overlying an apparently chaotic and cruel world (see Solomon & Higgins, 1996, p. 71) to appreciate the notion of facing up to the harsh realities of life. The pessimistic philosophical tradition has much to offer in not only problematizing the most routinely taken-for-granted views of our day but also in better understanding what it means to be human (cf. Peyre, 1948). Deinstag’s (2006) comments are again instructive:

Instead of blaming pessimism, perhaps we can learn from it. Rather than hiding from the ugliness of the world, perhaps we can discover how best to withstand it. ... [P]essimism’s critics have often assumed that it must issue in some sort of depression or resignation. But this assumption says more about the critics than their targets. Who is it, exactly, that cannot bear a story unless guaranteed a happy ending? Pessimists themselves have often been anything but resigned. Indeed, they have taken it as their task to find a way to live with the conclusions they have arrived at, and to live well, sometimes even joyfully. If this cannot be true for all of us, it is not the pessimists who are to blame, but the problems they grapple with. (p. x)

There is a fear, perhaps, of what a serious examination of the pessimistic tradition might bring, and this is arguably no accident. It is important to note here that it is not the label “pessimism” itself that matters so much as the ideas under consideration. As Jean-Paul Sartre observed in responding to perceptions of existentialist thought, “what people reproach us for is not essentially our pessimism, but the sternness of our optimism” (Sartre, 2007, p. 38). A gritty optimism, one might say, is as difficult a pill to swallow these days as any form of pessimism. Happiness, marketed as a commodity and promoted as consistent with a rosy view of the world, is a highly lucrative growth industry. Those who have a financial stake in this industry have a vested interest in ensuring that optimism remains the preferred attitude toward life. This will, after all, ensure that those who have “purchased” happiness in whatever form will, if they fall short in their endeavors, keep coming back for more. But probe a little further in seeking to understand happiness, and we can see that it is not a case of either/or: happiness and unhappiness (including the particular form of unhappiness that is despair) can not only co-exist but may shape each other. How, why, and where we seek happiness can be heavily influenced by what we think, feel, and do as we experience unhappiness, suffering, and despair.

Hope can exist without optimism (cf. Deneen, 1999) and, as argued elsewhere in this book, become most vivid, most meaningful and significant, in the midst of despair. Faith too can deepen in the face of the despair of uncertainty. As Paul Tillich (1952) puts it, “the acceptance of despair is in itself faith and on the boundary line of the courage to be;” “as long as this despair is an act of life it is positive in its negativity” (pp. 175–176). In the contemporary Western world, we are strongly encouraged to believe it is merely a matter of *choosing* to be either a “glass half-full” person (and thereby one who is happier) or a “glass half-empty” person (a miserable sod who, in adopting a pessimistic perspective, brings not only him- or herself but also everyone else down). The very fact that we have frequent recourse to such trite characterizations of the human condition is itself a sign of the times.

Indeed, some critics of the unreflective obsession with positive thinking argue that it does great harm. Barbara Ehrenreich (2009), for instance, draws attention to the damaging effects of the self-created image of Americans as “positive” people. Ehrenreich is supportive of enhanced happiness for all, but points out that this cannot be obtained merely by wishing that it were so. “We need,” she says, “to brace ourselves for a struggle against terrifying obstacles, both of our own making and imposed by the natural world.” The first step in doing so is to “recover from the mass delusion that is positive thinking”

(p. 13). Sara Ahmed, too, points to work that shows how happiness can be used to justify oppression:

Feminist critiques of the figure of “the happy housewife,” black critiques of the myth of “the happy slave,” and queer critiques of the sentimentalization of heterosexuality as “domestic bliss” have taught me most about happiness and the very terms of its appeal. Around these specific critiques are long histories of scholarship and activism which expose the unhappy effects of happiness, teaching us how happiness is used to redescribe social norms as social goods. We might even say that such political movements have struggled *against* rather than *for* happiness. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 2)

It would seem, then, that there is merit in stepping back for a moment to think again about currently dominant discourses on happiness. As we have seen, the commodification of happiness—the process of converting it into something that is packaged, marketed, sold, and “consumed”—rests upon the same limited ontology that underpins neoliberal life more generally. The narrowness of our concept of what it means to be human not only diminishes our understanding of choice, happiness, and despair, but also limits our understanding of the role and purpose of education. But even where happiness is promoted for other reasons (i.e., not simply to make a profit or serve one’s own interests), some of the deeper assumptions about its value appear to often go unexamined. Happiness has been portrayed as universally preferable over unhappiness, and optimism has been given privileged ontological and moral status over pessimism. These ideas warrant critical examination.

The next section takes up these themes in more detail, with a return to Dostoevsky paving the way. Dostoevsky’s portraits of the Underground Man and the Ridiculous Man, when revisited in the light of ideas considered in other chapters of this book, prompt us to ask searching questions about happiness, suffering, and human fulfilment—questions that disrupt conventional views of what should be valued in educational terms and reflected in what, how, and why we teach.

## **Complicating the Picture: Rethinking Happiness, Unhappiness, and Despair**

Let us return to the two key texts considered in chapter 5. The connection between *Notes from Underground* and “The Dream of a Ridiculous Man” is pivotal in understanding the fundamental energies at work in Dostoevsky’s

fiction. When Dostoevsky wrote *Notes from Underground*, it was as if he had suddenly found the voice he had been looking for all his writing life. In the Underground Man we find, for the first time, the coiled tensions, contradictions, and frailties of the Dostoevskian individual on display, vividly and dramatically. In this short novel we also see the brutality of human relations, the alienation that characterizes many lives, and the sense of loss and longing that would figure so prominently in Dostoevsky's later work. We find that the human being is not one but many, and discover that our knowledge not only of the world but of ourselves will inevitably fall short of what we regard as ideal. Wrapped up in the Underground Man—in his expressed beliefs, his circumstances, and the events he describes—is everything that was to give Dostoevsky's work its literary power.

The Ridiculous Man needs to be seen as the Underground Man's brother—perhaps even a non-identical twin. These two characters differ from each other in some important respects, but there are definite family resemblances: both are “outsiders;” both have a kind of hyper-consciousness of themselves and their surroundings; both wish to reach out to others (even if this is not evident at first glance), but struggle to do so effectively. Perhaps most notably, given the focus of this book, both the Underground Man and the Ridiculous Man live in *despair*. Their lives are filled with a sense of disgust as they examine themselves and the world. The Underground Man is the very embodiment of unhappiness—a thoroughly miserable creature, destined, it seems, to live with his sense of failure and his alienation from others for the rest of his days. The Ridiculous Man, initially on the brink of ending it all, discovers through his dream what appears to be absolute happiness: a group of people for whom all is light and joy, living free of worries, full of love for each other and for their world. From this encounter, his own life finds renewed sustenance, and the Ridiculous Man has a fervent desire to teach others about the secret of the happiness he has found. This state of innocence and happiness can, however, also be seen as a condition of despair.

In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard (1989) maintains that even those who appear to be furthest from despair may in fact be in despair. The heart of happiness, Kierkegaard argues, can be despair's “choicest dwelling-place” (p. 55). “A sense of security and repose,” similarly, “may mean that one is in despair” (p. 54):

Even what is humanly speaking the most beautiful and loveliest thing of all—a womanly youthfulness which is sheer peace and harmony and joy—is nevertheless despair.

For while it can be counted the greatest good fortune, good fortune is not a specification of spirit, and deep, deep inside, deep within good fortune's most hidden recesses, there dwells also the dread that is despair. (p. 55)

What is it that is missing in the apparently perfect world encountered by the Ridiculous Man? One critical element seems to be a certain *impulse to life*. The basis for the tranquility and harmony that prevails among the pre-corrupted other Earth dwellers is their absolute integration with each other and with the rest of nature. This may make them happy, but it can also limit the possibilities for human fulfilment. Complete integration can be seen as a form of *death*. Separation of a certain kind, painful as this is, is necessary for life. Separation may be evident in expressed or felt differences, in tensions, and in a sense of alienation and despair. The beginnings of this separation lie in something that makes us distinctively human: our capacity for reflective consciousness.

As we saw in chapter 5, Dostoevsky believed that the origin of consciousness was *suffering*. He saw suffering as necessary for anyone wanting to write well (see Pevear, 2002, p. 497), and he showed repeatedly, through his portraits of key characters, that suffering played a key role in the development of a heightened sense of self-awareness. Yet, as Unamuno suggests, the reverse is also true: *consciousness is the origin of suffering*. A pivotal element in the Fall of the idyllic other Earth dwellers—and it must be remembered that the Fall is initiated by the Ridiculous Man—is their loss of innocence and the emergence of a new form of consciousness. They start to theorize, to invent ideas and concepts, to critique their former mode of life. Science and laws and slavery arrive. With these changes, suffering arises. However, far from wanting to deny this, the people come to love their sorrow. They reach the very position Dostoevsky himself articulated in describing the creative process: they *seek* suffering and come to believe that “truth is attained only through suffering” (Dostoevsky, 1997, p. 314).

Suffering and despair are not equivalents, though they are closely related to each other. Despair might be seen as a specific form of suffering: a state that persists for some time, as a kind of shadow that accompanies a person. Frédérique Brossard Børhaug (2011) put it beautifully when she described despair as an “ethical backlight” in a human life: something that remains present throughout but which does not necessarily prevent us from also experiencing moments of happiness. “Moments” here must not be understood merely as periods of time but rather as elements or dimensions of a life where there are no rigid boundaries between states of being typically seen as opposed to

each other: happiness and unhappiness, joy and suffering, peacefulness and restlessness, hope and despair. Despair may be present in the background all along, announcing itself to us only when circumstances arise that bring it into sharp focus. We realize our humanity not by denying despair, as it appears, but by acknowledging it and responding to it. What Dostoevsky has to say about suffering also applies to despair when the latter is understood in these terms.

In seeking to consider in more detail the relationship between consciousness and suffering, Unamuno (1972) is again insightful:

Suffering is the way of consciousness, and it is through suffering that living beings achieve self-consciousness. To possess consciousness of oneself, to have personality, is to know and feel oneself distinct from other beings. And this feeling of distinctiveness is reached only through a collision, through more or less severe suffering, through a sense of one's own limits. Consciousness of oneself is simply consciousness of one's own limitation. I feel that I am myself when I feel that I am not others; to know and feel the extent of my being is to know where I cease being, the point beyond which I no longer am. (p. 154)

Unamuno goes on to ask: "How would one know one existed unless one suffered in some measure? How turn inward, achieve reflective consciousness, unless it be through suffering?" (p. 154). In pleasure, he says, we forget ourselves—forget our own existence. This, for Unamuno, is not a form of liberation but a process of alienation—of literally becoming an alien being. Thus, while we might acknowledge the alienation from *other* selves suffered by the Underground Man and the Ridiculous Man, if Unamuno is right the blissful inhabitants of the other earth are alienated from *themselves*—from the distinctive attributes that affirm their existence as human beings. For Unamuno, reflective consciousness—knowing that we know—is a *disease*, but one from which we cannot escape (p. 22). Existentially, we must live with this sickness, just as the body learns to accommodate the germs of a physical disease. The idea of health is, as Unamuno sees it, an abstract category, an impossibility. Theoretically, however, "we might say that a perfectly healthy man would no longer be a man but an irrational animal: irrational for want of any disease to ignite his reason" (p. 25).

We often think of despair as something to be avoided, perhaps more so than almost anything else, yet it is possible to not only accept that despair is present but also to engage it in productive ways. This is not in any way to diminish or deny the pain experienced by those in despair; nor is it to advocate that we impose despair on others "for their own good." It is rather to recognize

that if we are to realize our capacity for reflective thought, despair will be a part of this process. It is not only how we respond to situations and experiences of despair that matters. We may work *in*, *on*, and *with* despair, but at the same time, *despair works on us*. Attempting to understand these processes is an important educational task.

As Kierkegaard (1989) observes, while the actual experience of despair is, on multiple levels, horrific, in the *possibility* of despair we find what is most deeply human about us (pp. 44–45). Of despair as an illness, an ailment we all face, Kierkegaard believes we can say this: “it is truly providential to get it, even though it is the most dangerous of sicknesses if one does not want to be cured of it” (p. 56). Here, as argued in chapter one, I think Kierkegaard is only partially right. This is a sickness that, in part, defines us as human beings—and it is potentially a dangerous disease. It seems to me, however, that we do not always have to think of wanting to be “cured” of despair as an illness. And the basis for objecting to this characterization of despair—as something that must be cured or overcome—does not have to be discomfort with the theistic nature of Kierkegaard’s solution. Also problematic is the concept of finitude that underpins the idea of a cure. The very act of addressing one situation of despair can itself lead to the recognition and experiencing of other, new forms of despair. Despair does not “go away” so easily. As human beings, we undergo constant change, and in our unfinishedness our perceptions of, and responses to, despair as well as hope and happiness can also change.

## Pedagogical Implications

If education is, among other things, a process a deepening understanding—of extending and enhancing consciousness—some searching ethical questions arise, particularly for those of us who work as teachers. For it is not merely a matter of recognizing that we all suffer from despair; it is also necessary to acknowledge that we may play a role in increasing despair among those we teach. In fostering the development of a reflective or critical consciousness, we also open up the possibility of greater suffering. (I shall use the terms “reflective” and “critical” interchangeably in this chapter, mindful however of the fact that they need not be seen as equivalents in all contexts.) Kierkegaard (1989) argues: “It is the rising level of consciousness, or the degree to which it rises, that is the continual intensification of despair: the more consciousness the more intense the despair” (p. 72). This helps us to understand why

the Underground Man suffers so acutely (he sees himself as more educated than those with whom he interacts and his hyper-consciousness is in evidence throughout), and we may appreciate Kierkegaard's point by reflecting on our own educational experiences. But do we have a right as teachers to create pedagogical situations where others may also suffer in this way?

There is no simple answer to this question. One way to respond is to say that temporary suffering is necessary if later benefits are to accrue. Acceptance of a version of this line of argument is commonplace. We often believe, for example, that the stress involved in completing school tasks (assignments, examinations, and the like) will, in time, find ample compensation in the opportunities (to attend university, secure a better job, etc.) that would otherwise not be available. Or, we support the idea of children undergoing years of arduous practice in learning a musical instrument on the grounds that they will be grateful for having been pushed in this way by the time they reach adulthood. The notion of "no pain, no gain" is also routinely applied when seeking to improve ourselves physically, by, for instance, joining a gym.

Yet, it seems to me that there is something unsatisfactory in these forms of justification. There is an instrumentalist logic lurking in the background here, where it is assumed that there is an endpoint of some kind: the "reward" for the suffering. The experience of despair is, however, arguably something from which we may never fully escape. This applies especially when we think of the role education plays in deepening our consciousness. In Kierkegaard's and Unamuno's terms, this heightens our sense of despair. As we have seen in earlier chapters, the despair of education lies, in part, in *not being able to go back*. Short of being subject to sophisticated techniques of "brainwashing," or of being drugged into stupefaction, or of developing a brain altering illness, we cannot "unlearn" what has already been acquired. I am not talking here of factual information (that might easily be forgotten as the years pass) but rather of qualitative changes in our being—states of mind, ways of thinking, and forms of emotional development that emerge, gradually but surely, through the process of educational formation. We may find, for example, that our enjoyment of certain types of entertainment will diminish as we come to recognize their relative shallowness; or, we may experience greater distress when watching the news, feeling more intense anger at reports of corruption or exploitation, or more sadness and compassion when viewing the effects of natural or humanly created disasters.

If we seek through education to enhance the development of reflective consciousness in students, and we do so effectively, we intervene in their lives

in a way that will leave a permanent mark (cf. Boler, 2004; Zembylas, 2007). We risk playing a direct or indirect role in making those students unhappy, not merely for short periods in classrooms but in the very way they think about themselves, and the world, in their everyday activities thereafter. If instrumentalist justifications for an intervention of this kind are inadequate, a more promising line of defense might be to draw a comparison with some of the alternatives. We might say that developing a critical, and in that sense despairing, consciousness is better than deliberately “dumbing down” the curriculum or simply seeking to pump facts into students’ minds. Apart from being undesirable in themselves, we could argue, such approaches bring a host of other negative consequences. A pedagogical system that works against the formation of critically conscious beings allows social injustices to continue without contestation, undermines notions of informed consent in decision making situations (e.g., at the polling booth, or in a hospital), and closes off the possibility of new forms of experience that demand greater intellectual sophistication.

Even here, though, there is a sense that something of the spirit of Dostoevsky’s, Kierkegaard’s, and Unamuno’s work has been lost. These thinkers are so effective in portraying, in their different ways, the tragedy of the human condition because they recognize the tensions, the uncertainties associated with processes of human becoming. It is true that both Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard ultimately settled on faith-based ethical preferences, but neither did so without experiencing first-hand the deep-seated tensions portrayed so effectively in their published works. Dostoevsky, I believe, remained conflicted in his thinking about God and morality (see further, Kelly, 1988; Roberts, 2005), and with Kierkegaard, a master of irony (Golomb, 1992; Merrill, 1979), indirect communication (Webster, 2010), and literary seduction (Sæverot, 2011), we cannot even be certain of who the “real” author is. Indeed, we are wrong to seek one, and should simply let the different voices of his various pseudonyms work on us as Kierkegaard, or the multiple *Kierkegaards*, hoped they might. Kierkegaard was, in one sense, profoundly honest in his philosophical labors—probing, with great courage, where few before him had dared to go—but he was also deceptive. Never being able to quite “pin him down,” to ascertain his “true” views, may be exasperating, but it can also have pedagogical value. Deceit, as Sæverot (2010) has argued, can be educative.

What these thinkers, and many others in the existentialist tradition, have to teach us is that we can never uncover all the mysteries of reality, never be

absolutely certain of the moral ground on which our actions are based, never fully know ourselves. Education, I suggest, is also like this: it allows us not to become completely confident in our answers to some of life's deepest riddles but more appreciative of how much we do not know. In this respect, we are much indebted to a line of thinkers stretching back, in the West, at least as far as Socrates. Becoming less certain of our certainties, as Paulo Freire recognized, does not mean we need to be any less committed to social action and the ideal of building a better world (Freire, 1994, 1997a, 1998a; Roberts, 2010; Roberts & Freeman-Moir, 2013). Unamuno, in describing the nature of his own work, takes a similar stance:

Whoever perseveres and reads on will see how, out of this abyss of despair, hope my emanate, and how this crucial point may serve as [a] source for human, profoundly human, effort and action, may serve the cause of solidarity and even of progress. The reader who perseveres and reads on will discover a pragmatic justification. And he will see that to work and to be morally effective there is no need to count on either of the two opposed certitudes, no need to depend on the certainty of faith or the certainty of reason, and even less need to evade—ever—the problem of the immortality of the soul, or to distort it idealistically, that is, hypocritically. The reader will see that this uncertainty, the suffering, and the fruitless struggle to escape uncertainty, can be and are a basis for action and a foundation for morals. (pp. 141–142)

In pondering what this mode of thinking might mean for suffering and education, Simone Weil (1997) is also helpful: we should, she says, love suffering because it *is*, not because it is “useful” (p. 131). This implies that the problem of suffering is ontological, ethical, and educational. Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, and Unamuno show that to be human is to suffer—to experience despair. We *are* suffering (an ontological proposition), and to love suffering (an ethical task), as Weil counsels us to do, is to love ourselves—that is, commit ourselves to the task of becoming more fully human (an educational matter).

Education, when considered from this starting point, does not provide an escape from suffering but a growing awareness of it. Such an approach differs substantially from the prevailing view described earlier in this chapter. Education, by allowing us to recognize our own despair as well as the suffering of others, is an unsettling, uncomfortable process. To commit to education takes great courage, for teaching and learning, where they are connected with the development of a critical consciousness, are inherently risky activities. Today, we often seek predictability, and set up elaborate systems of measurement and evaluation to try and ensure we obtain this. We think of education

as working with knowledge—with that which is known—but it is, if anything, more a matter of stepping into the unknown. Education involves not merely accepting, but sometimes actively embracing, uncertainty.

Conceived in these terms, education is anything but a smooth, easy process; it is difficult, messy, complex, and necessarily lifelong. Once the process has begun, it cannot be stopped. Kierkegaard's philosophical approach was, in Bykhovski's (1973, p. 188) words, one of "restlessness, agitation, passion." Education is similar to this. To be educated is to live, constantly, with tensions. With education, we risk it all every time we seek to teach or to learn: we risk overturning what we think we know, undermining our values and beliefs, severing our sense of security and our reason for being. The uncertainty, the unpredictability, of education is what makes it both a source of despair and a source of hope.

## Conclusion

Where does this leave us in thinking about happiness and education? If the ideas considered in this book have any weight, our obsession with happiness as the "resolution" to all of life's difficulties must be seen as misguided. This is not to suggest that happiness is unimportant; nor does it imply a position "against" happiness. Happiness, for most of us, is a vital component of a good life—but it need not be *the* goal to which we should always aspire. We can experience happiness in a multitude of different ways, many of which may have little connection with currently dominant constructions of "the happy life." Education has a key contribution to make in highlighting some of those possibilities. There is much that could be done, also, in exploring the myriad ways in which teaching and learning can themselves become joyous activities. But this need not deter us from facing up to the question of despair.

The genesis of existential despair, Dostoevsky and Unamuno show, lies in our capacity for reflective consciousness. Education, to the extent that it enhances the development of this distinctively human quality, is thus complicit in the promotion of despair. We cannot always "escape" from despair but sometimes must continue to grapple with it, and in that sense, live through it. This, as we saw in chapter 4, does not imply the abandonment of hope; quite the opposite, in fact. While it is true that despair can be understood as a state of being or a situation "without hope," it is also possible to see despair as the very condition that gives hope substance and meaning. Hope, as it were,

“comes into its own” when despair is identified, understood, and addressed. Hope and despair, as Simone Weil and Paulo Freire both demonstrated, are intimately connected. Expressions of hope in times of relative harmony and prosperity can sometimes appear somewhat empty. It is when circumstances are most desperate that hope is needed more than ever. Despair need not provide a reason for inaction or indifference; to the contrary, it can serve as the basis on which a passionate commitment to life may proceed.

Education, as it has been interpreted in this book, does not always make us happier, but it can enable us to more deeply understand the suffering we and others experience. Happiness in its commodified form, as a kind of drug to be marketed and administered in regular doses, takes us not closer to our humanity but further away from it. Education has a critical role to play in allowing us to go on—accepting the risk of unhappiness, of uncertainty, and of continuous change.

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