

ON DISTORTING REALITY TO COMPREHEND DISTORTION

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The Point

There's an old expression that's voiced often and sounds so plausible that--as Hemingway might have said--it rings true. And after a day at the Chicago Art Institute or the Clark Museum (in Williamstown, Massachusetts of all places) or the Louvre (in Paris of course)--after studying the Monets, or the handful of Van Goghs, and scenes of the other Impressionists--one can believe that artists distort reality to understand reality. While good photographers may tell true stories, great art can reveal eternal truths. So it's no surprise to virtually any one of us to hear that a painting, a poem, a symphony, a building or a play has inspired generations and informed throngs. Notwithstanding, those plying the scholarly vocations keep their distance from art and avoid professional association with its practitioners. Is it any wonder? While artists deliberately distort, scientists work hard to gain greater and great precision. While artists create new forms and sounds and visions, scholars clarify and evaluate what we know and discover (rather than invent) what is unknown. While artists live subjective lives, academics and other professional students seek to live objective lives. So, is it any wonder that painters, poets, and musicians get short shrift in our scholarly journals and professional schools? Is it any wonder that the intrusion of art in any field--mental retardation--or the broader profession--special education--is almost always the interruption of a client or patient

and hardly ever the clear voice of the professional. The point of this paper is to pursue the argument that, if distorting reality clarifies reality, distorting the realities of abnormal environments (e.g., segregated institutions or schools) or unusual people (e.g., the disabled or different) could especially clarify those places and lives.

Creators and Destroyers

People create, People destroy. It's all part of the life and death of the individual, and the earth itself. What is sometimes forgotten is that everyone creates and everyone destroys. Usually, we think only of artists in terms of creation, and criminals or psychopaths in terms of destruction. But that's not the way things are. Of course, artists do create. By definition. And of course, criminals and psychopaths destroy. Also by definition. Ordinary citizens create things, and good people destroy things. There are those who create in the field of mental retardation, and those who destroy. And at times, it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. But always, the human being is not immune from either activity.

Some individuals create wonderful pictures or music. Others create environments. And for a few, after all is said and done the greatest creations are their own lives. Creating something is burdensome, but not for everyone in the same way. Some people have writer's blocks, and others can't make decisions about the most fundamental matters connected with their lives. But there is also the poor American composer, who must not only compete with contemporary artists, but also with Beethoven, Bach, Schubert, and all of the great composers since the beginning of music.

That's a far different burden than what confronts the person writing for the daily newspaper, whose only competition is with other reporters about today's or yesterday's news. It's different for the composer of classical music in contrast with the poet, or the novelist, or the painter. We have museums for old paintings, and somewhere in high school we read the Iliad and the Odyssey. But the writer and the artist do not constantly have their works judged against the best that has ever been created. The composer has that awesome handicap. Creators in mental retardation are more like the person writing for the newspaper than the poor fellow who is trying to compose a great symphony. But even the ordinary creator in our field must escape his own language to communicate, must realize that he has no personal voice of any great consequence. To create in one's instinctive voice is to risk incomprehension, even in the technical fields--but there the problem is so serious that it may go unnoticed.

Destroyers are judged more like composers than people writing for newspapers. One of the ultimate tests of the destroyer is what the Old Testament or the New Testament, or the Koran, or some other religious guide informs society about the deed. In the Old Testament, the people are admonished not to sin, but if they do they must beg forgiveness for their sins. However, God can only forgive them for the sins they commit against Him. For the sins committed against other mortals, the forgiveness must come from the aggrieved parties. That's a standard--irrespective of time, irrespective of situation, irrespective of the details of the crime. But we judge the monstrous act against society in terms of the whole of history's terrible crimes. Genghis Khan is a benchmark; and so is Hitler; and Stalin. Nazi Germany is a benchmark; so is every totalitarian state.

And so is the institutional mental retardation system. In the field of mental retardation, evil will always be judged against what took place in our institutions for the mentally retarded during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Argument

The great books and ideas on mental retardation are not necessarily in "mental retardation." Mental retardation books, education books, psychology books rarely contain primary materials or ideas. The books we have in mental retardation are derivative. Truly great books in mental retardation (as great books in education) are great books for virtually anyone because--in the most profound sense--the field of mental retardation (as the fields of education and psychology) is part of everything else. They are the fields of life. Emerson, Thoreau, Shakespeare, Dostoyevski, Frost, those people and others wrote great mental retardation books, as they wrote great education books, as they wrote great psychology. But those people weren't pedagogues or defectologists. Our field is too universal and our mission is too universal to be owned by either the American Association on Mental Deficiency or your nearest special education course. Your great scholars in the field of mental retardation are great in spite of their professionalism.

And poets? Or composers or artists? Poets have something to teach us--have something to teach the scientists, the doctors, the teachers themselves. Especially relevant are the poets whose lives transcend art, whose lives and art are poetic. Especially necessary are people who can create visions of life which are contemptuous of compromise with decency, who are intimidated by neither convention nor throng. Actually, not anyone will always want (or need) the truth; but everyone will seek sometime a more

comprehensible reality than what's available. And such a reality for people in our line of work may best be created out of the distortion of art.

In a novel of mine, I once wrote:

Many years ago, the people thought it would be good if special homes for mental defectives were created. The doctors believed that such homes would be healthier for eligible patients than the precariousness of community existence. The psychologists believed that such homes would prove more therapeutic than other arrangements. The educators believed that such homes would provide greater developmental opportunities than would public community facilities. The economists believed that such homes would be less expensive. Public safety officials believed that such homes would be more protective of both the general society and the defectives themselves. The politicians believed that such homes were what the people wanted. The parents thought that they should be grateful for whatever was allocated to relieve their problems. The defectives, not expected to think, were never asked to comment on the matter.

Only poets--not the doctors, who proved to be wrong, or all the others, who, too, were wrong--saw the world differently. Poets comprehend this life through eyes that see differently, ears that hear differently, minds that think differently, and souls that feel and dream differently. Therefore, poets neither shackled by the past nor contaminated by the future, not trained as technicians and, therefore, not constricted by that tradition were the first to accurately describe what had been wrought for the so-called defectives, and they were the first to envision a different world for people. (Blatt, 1976, p. 187)

While it can be said that teachers, psychologists and social workers, doctors and nurses, lawyers and politicians, administrators, and other professionals and technicians do things (usually good, sometimes bad), and by their works influence society (for good and bad), artists, poets, musicians, and other creators not only inform us about what they do and about how they influence the society, but (and this is their unique role and contribution) they inform us about what we do to one another. Long before the concept of normalization found its way into our textbooks on mental retardation, poets created metaphors on the good life, on the family, on the nature of human discourse,

on the home, friendship, sacrifice, love. Long before pollution and energy czars, artists painted pictures of what the world was like, what it has become, and what it might yet be. Long before the futurists, story tellers created images of Utopian communities, which from time to time were even acted out by that most courageous group of Thespians--those who would seek to live their dreams rather than dream their lives away. Long before the professional journals, writers created small and great works that mean little in the eternal scheme of things, but which once brought visions and hopes and understandings to a contemporary group--or to a person. The urge to create and communicate was not born with the invention of the professions.

The deeds of the creators can be found in each of humanity's achievements--our great cities, our concert halls, our libraries, our museums. As Dick Hungerford once remarked, they are also found in the millions and millions of homes where the shades are drawn evenly, and where a picture hangs on the wall, and where there is an effort to bring beauty to one's eyes and ears and, thus, to one's soul. Be it large or small, one who creates a good work always teaches the lesson that the magnanimous person forgets weakness and remembers kindness.

We in the field of mental retardation have not given our poets and artists very much of a chance to inform us about this world. Nor have we invited them to help us see ourselves, and each other. Nor do we seem driven to have them worry with us about our imperfections. It's even possible that the field of mental retardation or the professional teaching would suffer less with more artists and poets and fewer professionals and administrators. Cicero said that, "There is nothing so absurd but some philosopher has said it." But one can not envision a decent society in the absence of some absurd

philosopher, an outrageous poet, or a composer who creates incomprehensible music. Out of such dissonance, vivid stories of our lives and times are made to enrich us all. End of argument.

Reference

Blatt, B. Revolt of the idiots: A story. Glen Ridge, NJ: Exceptional Press, 1976.