

SELF-JUSTIFICATION¹

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On The Purpose Of Things

Long before people had been able to actually explore outer space, we have fantasized about life on other planets. There have been scientists, novelists and poets who have even dreamed of exploration in space beyond our universe--in galaxies beyond the moon, beyond Mars and Saturn, beyond all of the known planets. But scientists worry about explorations light years away from Earth? How do we think about flights to planets revolving around other suns--journeys which will take 800 or more years and, if Earth is ever to learn from those adventures, another 800 years to return? Forget about the technical problems in feeding the explorers. Forget how they will dispose of their garbage. Forget how they will rear generation after generation in an encapsulated environment. Forget even how they will be prepared to get along together, not only during the lifetimes of those who will start the journey, but also throughout the lifetimes of those who will continue it--and complete it 1600, 1700, possibly 2000 years later. The most perplexing question that scientists have yet to satisfactorily address--if they will ever satisfactorily address it--concerns how explorers will transmit from one generation to another, to another, throughout hundreds of years, the purpose of it all. That's the question. That's always the prepotent question concerned with a serious decision.

¹Before he died, the Italian poet and essayist, Cesare Pavese wrote that, from the time he could think until the moment of his demise, man is consumed by a constant addiction--his self-justification (The Burning Brand: Diaries 1935-1950 New York: Walker and Company, 1961). We evaluate all matters and all ideas in terms of how our existence, our behavior, our worth and destiny is justified. Enough said!

Today, we hardly remember what occurred a generation--a year?--ago. Today, we hardly behave as if we understand (or want to understand) the purpose of our country, the purpose of our religion, the purpose of our society. In the field of special education, the purpose of things usually gets short shrift. It's not only that we don't remember but, rather, that we prefer not to know. Thus, in the field of special education it may be that predicting what the next hundred or even ten years will be like is virtually as difficult as predicting what could happen to the descendants of spaceship explorers 2000 years later. As riders through the galaxies, in special education it's not so much "what could happen" which worries me, but what we eventually make of our purpose. Will we continue to know why we are on this journey? Do we know now? Will we remember what we have been asked to accomplish? Do we remember now? Even if but one generation of our explorers in special education deviates from the original purpose, all is lost. It's possible that the next generations in our field will stay on this track, or follow a path which is even more wrong than the one we now trod so ineptly. But what worries me is that these are issues which few among us worry about.

On What I Write

Writers should be known for both what they don't as well as for what they do write. In my work there are problems which I emphasize, and others which I neglect or omit completely. One should know the person--and the writer--for that which he reveals, but also for that which he prefers to ignore. One is knowledgeable for what he knows, but also for that which he is silent. Of course, writers make mistakes. Of course, I have made my share of them.

In my work, I have tried (albeit incompletely) to see our field as an historian and philosopher would see it. But as my colleague, Wolfensberger, and others said in other contexts, to be a philosopher of a human service one must necessarily be a philosopher and historian of the larger society. So that became

the work, however unprepared and inept I was for it. What the hell, better scholars have failed at the task. One wonders: Did Luther actually want to see mental defectives killed? Did Plato actually advise the placing of the deformed and inferior "in some mysterious, unknown place"? One wonders.

In my work, I have tried to discuss several recurring themes--the certain value that each human being has as a human being, the belief that as a human being each person is as precious as any other person; the idea that people are people, we're all fragile, we're all mortal, we're all interdependent; the idea that we can change the world, and the first step is when we change ourselves. Why do I repeat again and again those same ideas? Why do I elaborate again and again on permutations of those ideas? Is it as if I would seek the Holy Grail, or the lost Ark, or the physical tablets on which God gave His laws to the people? No, I don't want to certify eternal truths but, rather, to have us live as if we know certain important temporal truths. A wise colleague once admitted to me that the "secret" of his success is that he takes the obvious seriously. I sometimes think that what I've been writing is too simple, too obvious, possibly too irritating to the reader who is looking for scientific answers to the problems which have bedeviled us--even old if not new scientific answers. But I am not the kind of writer or thinker to supply such answers. And so, I'll repeat what I've written, what I may too simplistically think about as obvious--that the essential history lesson to be learned is that all people can be educated, and that everyone is noble. I'll repeat the belief that the institutional director can be "good"; for while he may be the "locomotive" of segregation and banishment, he did not invent the instrument. He does not necessarily nourish and power it. More often than not, he is no more than the unwitting (or unwilling) tool. It is said that death and taxes are the inevitable consequences of living. It may also be said that the institution and its permutations are the inevitable consequences of bad ideas, bad ideals, or of greedy people. For as Rousseau remarked, everyone and everything

is good and noble, because we are made from the hand of God. And that which turns bad is the work of the hand of Man. But don't believe all of the histories of special education. The institutions were never much better than buildings on dirt. Their philosophies were never as great as those who articulated them. Learn from history. But also learn from all the ways possible.

Good, or bad (or worse, trivial), I write so as to reflect my values, my assessments of a field which has consumed me for more than 35 years. I probably have a chronic compulsion, a need, to write--I must write every day, and it doesn't matter very much what gets published or not.

I have written books and papers which have saddened some of my colleagues--books which insist on disdaining institutions they have nurtured and practices and ideals they have espoused. I have not loved those tasks. I've not enjoyed my role as critic. I do not find joy in causing others to suffer, or in causing discomfort to those who may even deserve it. But I do it. And the reader will do what he must do, think what he will think. We are all in a serious business. And I also believe that teaching and writing and learning can be sacred work, whose influences never die.

So there you have it--a brief clumsy piece which attempts to explain how I have been thinking about these matters. Frankly, what goads and motivates me to do this work are less the ideas that come out of it and more about how they can lead us to a better life. But if one was to confess as if this were to be his last moment, he might admit that it has always been the idea that intrigues and gives a life pleasure, if not total meaning. I have most enjoyed the ideas. I have most embraced the responsibility to articulate purposes and write about them in ways which might be worth remembering.