

ON A CERTAIN BLINDNESS IN TEACHING

By Michael S. Roth

Wherever a process of life communicates an eagerness to him who lives it, there the life becomes genuinely significant.

William James

“Her name was Eve. I have not changed it for purposes of disguise or of protection.”

“By Christmas I will be in the hospital.” Those are the words I remember best. They bespoke a knowledge that was frightening. She said them with certainty and with urgency. “By Christmas I will be in the hospital. This has happened before. I can feel it coming.” She stared at me intently. OK, what happens now that he KNOWS. What changes, what remains the same? What will he do with this knowledge? What did I say? I recall some lame questions such as “Are you getting some help?” and “What kind of medication are you taking?” Perhaps they were not so lame as they felt to me at the time. Perhaps they allowed her to continue speaking what she knew and confessing what she did not. In any case, she went on in some detail about her experience with manic-depression (was it yet labeled bipolar syndrome?). The mental hospitals, the recovery, and fall back into normality. The slipping away of that recovery and the excitement and terrifying qualities of that slipping away.

Her name was Eve. I have not changed it for purposes of disguise or of protection. Eve was very ill when I encountered her in my first year of teaching, though it took me quite some time before I realized this. Her aggression in the classroom was, I imagined, like that which one might find among some intelligent people somewhat bored by school, and very frustrated with the decorum of the seminar situation. I had known lots of students like this, so I thought, in my own undergraduate years. She acted out a lot, she disrupted class and then made up for it with incisive or witty remarks. In one week she would not complete assignments and in another she would overwhelm the seminar with the quality and depth of her work. She also changed appearance radi-

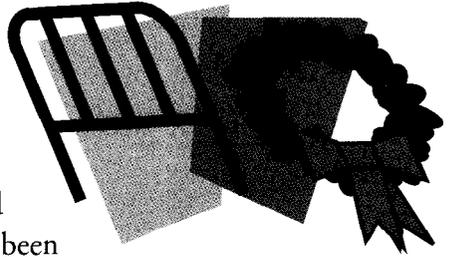
cally during the course of the semester, gaining formidable amounts of weight and then losing much more than she had put on. Eve made her presence felt, but it was very unclear to any of us in the class how we were to acknowledge that presence.

How did I cope with this provocative participation? Rather typically, I think: I rewarded her contributions and punished (with grades, with cutting remarks) her disruptions. It was a serious seminar on “History and Fiction in the Nineteenth Century.” We tried to wrestle with questions about how one represents the truth, and with how some decisive nineteenth-century texts developed strategies for responding to historical changes through new ideas about truth and its representation. What counts as true in different contexts? How do we respond to different modes of truth telling and how are these responses mediated by our own histories? How is the attempt to recount the truth mediated by history, and how is our understanding of history mediated by our notions of truth?

By Christmas I will be in the hospital. What counts as true in this context? How was I to respond to this unusually frank and fearfully confident mode of truth telling? I suppose I could have changed the mode in which I had been

responding to this student. Like many of my colleagues seem to do when undergraduates express the desire to no longer be a student, I might have adopted the role of counselor, friend, or confidant. These roles might have been helpful to Eve, and they may have established the kind of relationship she was looking for. But I did not move in these directions; I remained the teacher. But what knowledge could we explore that would be able to stand up to her own certainty and fear? What subject could we discuss that would have something to do with what was clearly the most pressing issue for Eve: *By Christmas I will be in the hospital.*

By the time Eve had started the seminar, she had already developed an enthusiastic interest in Nietzsche. His writings drew her like a magnet, and she hungered for more time with his texts and more guidance in reading them. Our seminar was already planning to read *The Genealogy of Morals*, and I suggested that we meet weekly for a supplementary discussion of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. We read slowly and puzzled out some of the important issues together; or, rather, I should say that she fought her way



to clarity about some particularly powerful passages. Zarathustra has to descend very far before he can return and before he understands what it means to overcome. Overcoming is never separated from repetition in Nietzsche's work and perhaps this was part of what attracted Eve to his philosophy. She wrote a splendid paper at the end of term and was really pleased with herself, full of pride and achievement. I still vividly remember her gleeful shouts when she received her grade and comments. She did not return the next semester. She was in the hospital by Christmas.

Carol never said much in class, and when she did nobody quite knew what to make of her remarks. She seemed not all that interested in the material for the seminar, a course called "History, Memory, and Desire" in which we read texts from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Toni Morrison on questions of recollection, truth, narrative, and loss. We were reading Roland Barthes' book, *Camera Lucida*, an essay on photography, on representing the past, and on living on after the death of his mother. This is a text, I thought, that 20-year-old students would have a lot of trouble with. Barthes meditates on how we use photography to cope with loss in life, and with how photography changes what it means to cope. Most of my students in sunny southern California did not seem to me marked by loss, and I wondered if this was a book that would just not speak to them.

I had asked the students to each bring in a photograph that was important to him or her (almost all the students were women, since the course was listed at a women's college). We were to analyze these pictures with the phenomenological categories that Barthes makes use of early in his essay. The discussion was excellent. We were all interested in seeing the pictures, and also in hearing about who had what kind of pictures near to their beds, their desks, their phones. One woman spoke shyly and with an air of semi-embarrassment as she talked about a photograph of her grandmother she keeps near to the place she works. One of the men in the class used Barthes' categories to analyze pictures of an old girlfriend, and of his father. Carol raised her hand to speak. She did not have a photograph with her, she explained, but she would like to tell us about one. There were two, really. The first was taken in the spring in her family's backyard. The trees were in bloom, her siblings were smiling. They were a family, a family all together. She explained that this was pretty special since her truck-driver father was not there much of the time. The next picture was

(she laughed softly, nervously as she said this) taken almost in the same spot (she emphasized these words as if *that* was the remarkable aspect of these pictures) in her mother's backyard. But her father was not there. We could all hear the difficulty she was having in keeping her voice on the pitch of the carefree-young-girl that she was so adept at adopting in class. You see, she tearfully explained, her father had left the family, her parents were split now. She tried hard to smile, "*Sorry, it was just that those photos occurred to me,*" she said as if she needed to excuse herself, "*when we all started talking about photography and loss.*" She had lost her father and, in a way, her family. *Funny, there were no flowers in the second picture.*

Now she was looking to me for help. OK, I've said much more than I wanted to, much more than I've ever said before in a public situation. Help! I looked around the room, trying myself to regain control. Carol had clearly said something they all understood, and she had said it in such a way as to pass beyond the conventional emotional content of classroom interventions. And now the students (including Carol) were looking to me to be the teacher, to make it possible to go on as a class. Could it be done while acknowledging the steps Carol just took, or was "going on as a class" dependent on our losing the real force of Carol's narrative of loss?

While meeting to discuss a recent conference on feminism in the 1990s, a group of my students (in this group, all women) began to talk about their feelings of solidarity with other women. The Asian-American and African-American women were talking about how they felt more comfortable with other women of color when there was a political crisis on campus or in the region. The white women (who were a minority in this class) nodded affirmingly, but one of them, Beth, asked with real intensity: "Are Jews white?" I was struck by the force of this question. What was she asking? As I thought about the query and the puzzled response to it, it seemed to me that Beth wanted to know if she was to be allowed into the circle of solidarity; if being a Jew was enough to gain her access to those who believed they "knew how it felt to be oppressed."

One of the issues at stake in Beth's question was what it meant to claim a legacy of oppression and who was entitled to do so. Why would one want to make such a claim? The students were saying that this enabled them to connect with others who would

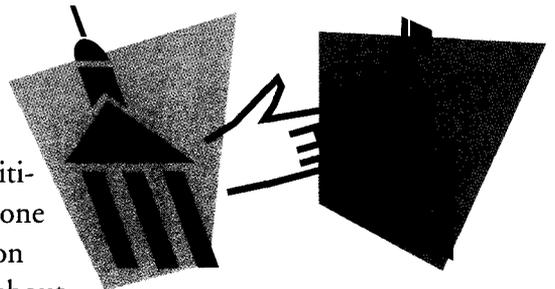
understand them and on whom they could count. Claiming a legacy of oppression thus established what moral philosophers like to call a “we-group,” people with whom one identifies and with whom one feels connected. Establishing a “we-group” can be a source of comfort, of defense, and of pleasure. In this regard my students reminded me of my parents, who, when traveling anywhere would immediately search out “landsman” with whom they could sit, eat, or kibitz. These people were no longer perfect strangers. When Beth asked “Are Jews white?” she was asking the others if they considered her a stranger. She wanted into the group, and claiming a Jewish legacy might have been just the ticket.

There are many ways to discuss the politics of education in the U.S. today. Indeed, these discussions have for many taken the place of both serious scholarship and genuine inquiry. Instead, we see well-worn ideological positions refurbished with a university coating. The results are predictable and marketable. Current debates about the canon (canons), about diversity, and about freedom of inquiry and expression are not responses to the so-called politicization of the university but attempts to steer education in particular political directions. Who should be served by the university and how? This would be an important question to pursue, but do we even have the intellectual tools to do so now? Where would we begin?

In the current debates about the lost soul of American politics, “political education” usually means a politicized or ideological education, one based more on prejudice than on reason or facts. This discourse about

the university is blind to the necessity and desirability of political education. Citizens are not born, they are made, and education in being political is crucial for a healthy democracy. Universities, to be sure, have only a very small role to play in an individual’s political formation, and their place in the polity’s development of an active citizenry is limited. But they can have an important political function for those who work within them. How can we ensure that this function fosters democratic political education rather than political corruption? Perhaps my three narratives can help us reflect on this question.

The first two stories evince the attempt to carve out a space



in which education takes place. This is not exactly a separate, disconnected space, but it is a protected one. When Eve told me that she knew she would be in the hospital before Christmas she was trying (at least in part) to break that space. *How are we going to talk seriously about Flaubert, Michelet, and Marx when it is clear that I am sinking into madness? How can you go on teaching about representing the truth when I have stopped taking the drugs that might keep me from falling apart?* I imagine that almost every teacher hears this question in some form: *What can you possibly have to teach ME?*

Reading Nietzsche with Eve was in no way an attempt “to deal with her problem,” if by “problems” we mean her manic-depression. But it was not a denial of her fears about this condition, nor was it an escape from her questions about why she was sinking into a pit she knew and detested. (This was an aspect of Eve’s knowing that I found most disturbing. She could see where she was going, but seeing it made no difference in her capacity to change. And her incapacity to change did not block — at least at this moment — her lucidity.) Nietzsche provided us with a language, a rich, complex network of issues to which Eve could connect herself but which did not merely reflect her own, immediate personal concerns. There came a time, I later learned, when Eve could no longer speak a language that any one else could understand. But for a few months, reading Nietzsche allowed us to think together about issues that were of vital importance to her in a way that was open to others. Reading together provided a *mediation* of the personal into the public. Finding one’s issues acknowledged in some public way (even if the representative of the public is a notoriously anti-democratic philosopher or merely a teacher in an independent study) is to experience an aspect of the mediation of politics, and perhaps of the attraction of democracy. Finding one’s issues acknowledged in some public way is also to experience a crucial aspect of education. (Is it necessary to say that this finding, this acknowledgment, is only a beginning of politics, only an aspect of education? Of course, acknowledgment alone does not solve problems; public recognition is not a substitute for power or for knowledge. There were moments when I believed that our discussions were going to make an important difference in Eve’s battle to stay afloat. That was a mistake, or rather it turned out to be a mistake.)

Carol’s declaration in class about her family pressured the

“Reading together provided a mediation of the personal into the public.”

boundaries of the “public way” we had adopted in the seminar. Was she allowed to talk this way in class, was she allowed to appear this way to her fellow students and her teacher? When Carol and the other students looked to me to reestablish the class after she had said her piece, I like to think that what they were looking to me for was mediation. Was there a way of acknowledging what she said and still continuing with the task at hand: the understanding of the representation of the past on film, especially as Barthes had conceptualized it? Obviously, there is no formula for doing this. One wants to provide the student(s) with the sense that their concerns count in the public context of education, not that any particular student or students dictate the context of education. Barthes, too, throughout *Camera Lucide* is struggling to find a way to address his longing for his recently deceased mother; to use the language of understanding to speak his feelings of loss, and to use his feeling of loss to deepen his understanding. So to reestablish the class or the public dimension of the class, I only had to read Barthes’ responses, his calls, back to Carol. She was surprised, I think, to realize that she was already in conversation with the text of this French post-structuralist.

Might this story be relevant to some debates about multiculturalism and diversity? What would happen to our curricula and our teaching if they were capable of responding to the issues and concerns of those students who feel outside of the conversation? Responding to these issues and concerns does not mean focusing the course on a specific politics of identity in order to meet a group’s demands to be represented in the class. It means finding a way to enhance our students’ capacities to read and think allegorically: to find in a particular set of issues an acknowledgment of their own deepest concerns. Barthes was not speaking directly about divorce nor Nietzsche about mental illness, but their texts could be read to respond to Carol and Eve. There is no formula for this kind of reading either, but it does seem that some of the claims being put forth for participation in education are calls for acknowledgment. For acknowledgment of this kind to take place, one has to want to be part of the conversation, and one has to want to expand the conversation. This will is often lacking on the different sides of recent debates about the university and politics, and without it there is no possibility of a more inclusive political education. An educational system in a democracy cannot afford to be blind to the efforts of citizens to enter and alter the conversa-

tion that comprises an important part of political education.

When Beth asked “Are Jews white?” she was clearly calling for acknowledgment. She wanted to be recognized as someone who also suffered from oppression, and thus as someone whom the other students would not consider a stranger. The students were talking about solidarity among women of color as a resource for fighting against social injustice. Their shared identities as victims of historical and ongoing oppression was both a tool for politics and a comfort in the face of continued victimization. How was one able to participate in this sharing in the service of changing the patterns of injustice? Was there a form of allegorical thinking that would enable these students to connect with one another without a racial or ethnic common marker?

In the past few years, claiming a legacy of oppression has come to be used not only as a tool to escape from cycles of oppression, but as a vehicle for maintaining one’s connection to — even identification with — it. In attaching oneself to a legacy of oppression one may reach for a moral superiority that our culture often awards to victims (that it recognizes as such). This award of moral superiority is no real substitute for justice, but it can be a powerful balm in a world of continued economic, social, and political inequality. Universities and the media have become specialists in providing feelings of moral superiority to people instead of intelligent responses to demands for real social change. In these cultural arenas, officially sanctioned marginality has become a moral high ground, the latest opiate of the people. How can we know if Beth wanted solidarity as a badge of righteousness or if instead it was a “haven in a heartless world” or even a tool for political change?

In 1899, William James published *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*. The second of the talks to students is called “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.” The blindness James refers to is our inability to see the values and meaning that other people attribute to their experience of the world (including their experience of us). We are external to one another: “The meanings are there for others, but they are not there for us.” James tells of his own wandering in the hills of North Carolina, and his perception of the blight the settlers had brought to the land.

The forest had been destroyed; and what had “improved” it out of existence was hideous, a sort of ulcer, without a single element of artificial grace to make up for the loss of

Nature's beauty.

"What sort of people are they who have to make these new clearings," James asked the "mountaineer" who was driving him.

"All of us," he replied; "why, we ain't happy here unless we are getting one of those coves under cultivation." I instantly felt that I had been losing the whole inward significance of the situation. Because to me the clearings spoke of naught but denudation, I thought that to those whose sturdy arms and obedient axes had made them they could tell no other story....

I had been as blind to the particular ideality of their conditions as they certainly would also have been to the ideality of mine, had they had a peep at my strange indoor academic ways of life at Cambridge.

"People often are blind to one another, closed into their own world of experience."

James talked to students about how people often are blind to one another, closed into their own world of experience, and only capable of (mis)translating the experiences of others into their own terms. He saw a recognition of this blindness as "the basis of all our tolerance, social, religious, political. The forgetting of it lies at the root of every stupid and sanguinary mistake that rulers over subject peoples make."

In his talk to students, James does not discuss how he came to recognize his own blindness, how he came to see how much he was missing. In teaching, we find ourselves blind in some of the same ways that James discussed. We also find ourselves in a position to overcome this blindness (in ourselves and in our students), or at least to recognize it in the public space of education. For Eve, Nietzsche was the vehicle for recognition, for moving from private pain to a kind of public acknowledgment. For Carol, something about the seminar and about photography enabled her to represent her past to others, and to find that the other participants in the conversation were capable of responding to her as a member of the group. For Beth, there was a strong desire to see her fellow students overcome what she thought as their blindness to her and to her commonality with them. Can my experience count for you and can you possibly see how it counts for me?

Teachers are in a privileged position to help others recognize the ways in which we all fail to see, pay attention to, and connect with the experiences of others. This is not only because we can

give our attention to those groups and issues that have been under-represented within academia, although this is often a significant task. We can teach students to make use of the levels of mediation provided by education, to think allegorically, and to try to puzzle out the diverse ways that people give significance to their lives. Forgetting the blindness of which James spoke remains a dangerous possibility in teaching, leading to solipsism and to dogmatism rather than to thinking. As teachers, we find ourselves (or should I say we *can* find ourselves) in a position to call attention to this blindness, to show how it works, who it serves. Remembering to look for the “whole inward significance” of another’s situation, is a crucial dimension to any inquiry that takes us beyond the comfortable borders of our own we-groups. In crossing these borders we need not only confront strangers; we can also find people who desire acknowledgment and who are capable of returning recognition. In so doing, we can teach our students to become teachers of themselves and others, and to become citizens eager to understand those around them as they understand themselves. Although this is not the only kind of understanding that can be produced in the classroom, it is a crucial one for citizens in a democracy.

MONOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES AND CAMPUS DIVERSITY

By Jane Fried

American higher education has been dominated by scientific paradigm since the mid-nineteenth century. This paradigm influences all dimensions of our colleges and universities, including teaching, learning, and research. The paradigm assumes the superiority of reason over emotion; objectivity over subjectivity; the independent, noncontextual existence of empirical data; the irrelevance of the observer's perspective to that which is observed; the existence of universal, noncontextual truths; and the primacy of technical and operational concerns over issues of belief or meaning.

“A paradigm which assumes uniformity in standards for teaching, learning, and research is ill suited to promoting diversity.”

Manifestations of this paradigm can be seen in a variety of institutional practices. In teaching, learning, and research we can see the enhanced prestige of the “hard” disciplines, i.e., data based, laboratory focused, or lucrative over the soft or economically marginal disciplines like the human services or many social sciences. Faculty seem to prefer cognitive instructional methods over methods which involve either emotion or discussion of multiple interpretations as revealed by students' differing perspectives.

A paradigm which assumes uniformity in standards for teaching, learning, and research is ill suited to promoting diversity, whether it is based on gender, race, culture, or any other set of constructs. Nevertheless, many colleges and universities have committed themselves to promoting or celebrating difference and integrating knowledge of culture, gender, and so forth into their curricula. Many institutions have adopted a culture-as-artifact approach, studying about culture rather than transforming the teaching-learning process (Niteo 1994). Celebrations such as African-American History Month highlight the contributions of specific groups to American culture without disrupting traditional teaching schedules or methods.

Even when institutions integrate information about culture