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Thinking and Action: Preparing Students to Engage Complexity within Themselves and in the World

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Abstract

This essay explores the dynamic tension between the human need to cultivate an autonomous identity and the desire to be part of a larger reality, suggesting that authentic morality emerges from a person's struggle with the ever-shifting overlap between these two drives. Creating an intersection between thinking and action, service-learning pedagogy draws us into a creative confrontation with these drives, preparing students to engage complexity within themselves and in the world.

Formal philosophy is often studied as if our brains were in bubbles floating outside of our bodies and above the gritty, mundane, everyday world. Inevitably these bubbles float back to earth and pop anyway, so why not teach philosophy out of the bubble? This paper encourages an approach that puts our minds back in our bodies and teaches philosophy as a vital process of thinking and acting in our personal and public lives.

Aristotle made an important distinction between the virtues of thought and character that informs this approach. He identified the intellectual as the habit of thinking well whereas the moral is that of acting well. For Aristotle, the ability to be a just person comes from acting as well as thinking justly:

The many, however, do not take these actions. They take refuge in arguments, thinking that they are doing philosophy, and that this is the way to become excellent people. They are like a sick person who listens attentively to the doctor, but acts on none of his instructions. (1999, p.22)

Thinking and acting well are not naturally conjoined; we have to work to bring them together. The question then becomes, what role does or should higher education play in the process of cultivating good thinking and action in our students and in ourselves? Many educators believe that we can't avoid being part of this process. Charles Strain, of De Paul University, writes: "All education, to the degree that it has any impact, is character forming. Even the most value neutral course conveys the value of rational inquiry as a guiding principle in human life." He adds, "If we as educators are implicitly affecting students' moral development . . . we ought to become conscious . . . of how we

¹ *Julia van der Ryn teaches philosophy and directs the Service-Learning Program at Dominican University of California. Her work with students, faculty, administration, and community partners fuels her appreciation of the vital tension that defines our humanity.*

are doing so” (2005, p.68). Strain advocates the use of service-learning, as do many other educators.

Service-learning is the integration of academic curriculum with meaningful service that meets community identified needs and course learning objectives. It is an educational approach that can bridge the pedagogical gap in moral philosophy between thinking well and acting well, or between theory and practice in any course. *Beyond the Tower: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Philosophy* offers compelling testimony and research from philosophy professors across the country. In the foreword, David Hoekema, former president of the American Philosophical Association, comments that, “service-learning has come to be one of the means by which students learn philosophy and confront foundational questions of meaning, value, and responsibility” (2006, p.x). Cathy Ludlum Foos, of Indiana University East, whose research focuses on the ethical and political implications of service-learning, notes the rise of the concept of citizenship in higher education along with a focus on helping students develop the personal qualities that will allow them to make choices that take into account the well-being of others. She discusses the ways in which service-learning “can be used by teachers to promote the goals of liberal moral education while warding against the negative aspects of individualism” (2006, p.102). Foos contends that instilling the concept of fairness and the ability to deal critically with one’s experience and assumptions is difficult to achieve through discussions of theory, hypothetical cases, and current events alone: “In so far as no decision with real consequences is called for, the learning process is incomplete” (2006, p.107). David Lisman, of the University of Denver, states that praxis deepens the potential for philosophy to be both socially and personally transformative. Change and growth occur when “we detect a lack of convergence between the intellectual aspect of our purpose and our feelings about the ways things should be.” We can utilize this awareness to “clarify our purpose, and thereby our concepts, through adopting forms of action that bring our intellectually relevant beliefs in accordance with out emotionally relevant beliefs” (2006, p.100).

As Jacob Needleman outlines so beautifully in his newest book, *Why Can’t We Be Good?*, it is one thing to know intellectually what it is to be a moral person and quite another to *be* that person. Needleman asks,

Do any of us really understand how the mind needs the body in order really to think, really to understand what it means to act, to be, to serve the good? Do any of us understand why we human beings need each other in order to find our own real mind, the mind of the lover of wisdom, the mind that is the source of virtue? (2007, p.37)

In the section that follows, I will explore a fundamental aspect of human nature, that complicates our ability to combine thinking and action in a moral response to the world. I also propose that it is this inherent tension, both the gift and burden of consciousness, that drives our need for meaning and ethical balance.

Meaning Making and the Twin Ontological Drives

Each of us, knowingly or not, is engaged in the philosophical process of making sense of our world and our place in it. What we value, our ideals and principles, and our desire to lead lives that mean something are intrinsically linked. We may be searching in very different ways, but we are all seeking meaning of some sort, a meaning which is inextricable from our moral stance in the world. Yet the more insights we gain, the more complexity we encounter. As Simone de Beauvoir articulates so well, we are faced with the difficult reality in which “meaning is never fixed . . . it must be constantly won” (1948, p.129). The struggle to fix meaning, or to make it static, is a reaction against the real nature of our existence and all the factors that we cannot control—like death. We may find comfort in simplistic interpretations and narrow truths that appear to steady the flux of our lives and counter the contradictory forces we feel brewing within us. But most of the time we live these contradictions without exploding because they are a natural part of our condition.

So, what is this vital tension? The simplest explanation is that we are driven in what may appear to be two different directions: to possess a personal identity *and* to share in a collective identity. We have the potential to be unique, autonomous individuals and to fuse with a larger reality—but we perceive these as separate goals at odds with each other. Understanding how to encompass both drives is at the heart of any true ethical balance between individual and world, self and community.

Multidisciplinary scholars, Ernest Becker, Martin Buber, and Arthur Koestler have all contributed greatly to my understanding of these two distinct yet complementary drives. Ernest Becker identifies the “twin ontological motives” in which humans are “impelled by a powerful desire to identify with the cosmic process, to merge . . . with the rest of nature.” Conversely, they also want to be unique, “to stand out as something different and apart” (Becker, 1973, p.151-152). Buber’s “basic words” of “I-It” and “I-You” (I-Thou)² represent the way that we objectify the world in order to define our own identity and our potential for openness to authentic encounter or relationship with the world. In *I and Thou* (1971) and numerous other writings, Buber poetically delineates the ways in which these two ways of relating to the world are inevitable, yet the expansiveness of the “I-You” experience can inform and broaden the limits of the “I-It” relation.

Koestler and Becker name the two human drives of “self-assertion” and “self-transcendence” and shed light on the way that humans are microcosms of the larger natural system. In sum, self-assertion is the way in which our ego develops a distinct selfhood, the “dynamic manifestation of . . . individuality” (Koestler, 1978, p.60).

Ego, in Latin, means “I-myself” and confirms the singularity of our existence as

² I use “I-You” rather than “I-Thou” per Walter Kaufmann’s 1970 translation of *I and Thou*. In the prologue, Kaufmann writes, “I-You sounds unfamiliar. What we are accustomed to is I-Thou. But man’s attitudes are manifold, and Thou and You are not the same. Nor is Thou very similar to the German *Du*.” He elaborates: “Thou can mean many things, but it has no place whatever in the language of direct, nonliterary, spontaneous human relationships.” Kaufmann claims that Buber’s whole project in *I and Thou* is to get away from the “formulas of theologians and philosophers” yet, ironically, “a theologian would translate it and turn *Ich und Du* into *I and Thou*” (Buber, pp.14-15, 1970).

sentient beings. Ego is not a dirty word. It is a word that signals our potential to evolve, to grow, to express our creative and unique identity. The other drive for self-transcendence represents the desire to expand that singularity and to merge with a larger reality—to be part of something bigger than ourselves. This drive is an outward motion, a desire to integrate, to surrender our autonomy, this “integrative tendency expresses [the human] dependence on the larger whole” to which we inherently sense we belong (Koestler, 1978, p.60). In *Janus*, Koestler describes the way in which every organism is always two things at once: a whole entity in and of itself and also part of a larger structure. As conscious beings, humans experience the drive for wholeness, for an autonomous identity while, at the same time, they intuitively know that they cannot avoid their “partness” in a larger reality (1978, pps.23-69). We are interconnected and interdependent. Yet we also have the potential to strive for and be unique individuals. This is the irony of our condition—in order to see ourselves with any clarity, we have to blur our mental vision to hold these two images of ourselves within the same frame. Although we can only strive for the unattainable ideal that each of these drives represents, as part of the natural system, we already *are* both things. Koestler describes how the apparent autonomy of our physical being can be broken down into smaller and smaller organisms that are all doing the job of keeping us alive. Zoom out and you see a distinct individual, thinking and acting while enmeshed in an interdependent natural and social world. Zoom farther out again and you can see the way that the same drives happen in corporate bodies. We can begin to understand why the need for autonomous identity can corrupt even the most virtuous core values of an institution.

It is ironic that many of the ideological wars that we experience are caused by the need for autonomy that can only be defined over and against the truth of another institution. The need for corporate identity can become dominant, shadowing the original vision of harmony and compassion present in the core truths and teachings it was created to protect.

Our own psychology complicates everything, of course. Our body functions in amazing symbiosis, every cell cooperating to strike constant balances on nature’s tightrope, while our minds are like contortionists, twisting reality often beyond recognition. The ego’s job is to build an indestructible self. Perhaps, if unchecked by its twin, the desire to self-transcend, the ego would have us all going around like the Incredible Hulk— but it is also due to the ego that we are not human blobs. Without an ego there would be no ego driving us to overcome our own egos. On the other hand, someone we think of as egoless, selfless, say, Mother Teresa, actually forged a strong personal identity as an instrument of God. Yes, even the enlightened have egos. As long as we are alive we manifest both drives. They are who we are.

The Struggle for Balance

The ancient Jewish scholar Rabbi Hillel posed an enduring riddle: “If not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I?” This deceptively simple question is at the heart of our complex human condition—our desire for purpose and to live as part in the world. Finding out how to be both “for oneself” and “for others” can only happen through the process of trying to live out that answer.

It is important to be clear that self-transcendence is not self-actualization or self-fulfillment, in the modern sense. Victor Frankl refers to actualization as a happy by-product of loving others and serving causes other than our own, Frankl believed that the “true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche.” Hence, self-transcendence, for Frankl, “denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself.” The conscious striving for self-actualization, like actively seeking enlightenment, puts too much emphasis on the self. Instead, “The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself” (1959, p.115).

So understood, self-transcendence is not some kind of miraculously sustained ecstatic, mystical state. It may be informed by the “oceanic,” primal, or revelatory peak experience but ultimately we need to fall back to earth and live out our connection to others.. Abraham Maslow, the father of humanist psychology, wrote that although we seek the cathartic experience in the exotic or in special pilgrimages, “the great lesson from the true mystics . . . [is] that the sacred is *in* the ordinary, that it is to be found in one’s daily life.” Maslow also rethinks his earlier work, writing that he was “imbalanced towards the individualistic [experience] . . . as a matter of fact, I can say much more firmly than I ever did that basic human needs can be fulfilled *only* through other human beings” (1964, pps. x-xiii).

In *Existential Psychotherapy*, Irvin Yalom also emphasizes that the focus of self-transcendence must be outward. He writes, “One must begin with oneself in order to forget oneself and to immerse oneself into the world; one comprehends oneself in order not to be preoccupied with oneself” (1980, p.439). Identity is deepened through self-knowledge tempered through our relations in the world. Becoming our truest selves is not the Romantic notion of finding a core essence that is unadulterated by the world. Instead our cleansing comes through an awareness of our natural state of interdependence and an understanding that while we can and should be uniquely creative beings, our autonomy is a metaphor not a concrete possibility.

Thus, finding meaning and authenticity is linked to our ethical stance in the world and entails constantly striking balances between our needs and the needs of others. Our challenge is to embrace this dynamic tension and to understand that moral balance calls for constant shifts and adaptations.

Feminist philosopher Judith Butler explains that we are aware of the “constant tension between the fear of undergoing violence and the fear of inflicting violence” (2004, p.137). We inherently sense our potential to become pathologically tilted and off-kilter. We are capable of committing horrific acts in the service of our own misguided egos or having surrendered our will to that of some charismatic maniac. Facing difficult truths is the burden and the gift of consciousness. As writer Barry Lopez beautifully encapsulates:

No culture has yet solved the dilemma each has faced with the growth of a conscious mind: how to live a moral and compassionate existence when one is fully aware of the blood, the horror inherent in life . . . If there is a stage at which an individual life becomes truly adult, it must be when one grasps the irony in its unfolding and accepts responsibility for a life lived in the midst of such paradox.

One must live in the middle of contradiction, because if all contradiction were eliminated at once life would collapse. (1986, p.413)

We are pulled apart by the very dynamic that makes us human. Social psychologist Erich Fromm asserts, “You can see that man really wants the impossible: He wants to lose his isolation and keep it at the same time. He can’t stand the sense of separateness, and yet he can’t allow the complete suffocating of his vitality” (1962, p.155).

The psychological tension of coping with our reality at times threatens to destroy us. We can understand the temptation to take ourselves out of a world that constantly makes us confront these contradictions. But, as I often irreverently say to my students, “A man goes up to the top of a mountain and finds enlightenment, so what?” The challenge is to come down from the mountain and be tested by the world. For example, Buber rejected his solitary mysticism and found the sacred relationship that he sought in the everyday world. He describes a “conversion” experience in which he has given up the “extraction, exaltation, ecstasy.” He writes, “I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken . . . I possess no fullness but each mortal hour’s fullness of claim and responsibility” (1955, pps.13-14). In a similar vein, contemporary scholar and activist, Joanna Macy, writes of her practice of engaged Buddhism:

The gate of the Dharma does not close behind us to secure us in a cloistered existence aloof from the turbulence and suffering of samsara, so much as it leads us out into a life of risk for the sake of all beings . . . the world is our cloister. (“Interdependence,” para. 4)

Whereas the ancient philosophers saw the individual as always connected to and dependent on her/his environment and relationships, the modern myth of the individual, of autonomy, authenticity, and freedom is based on the perverse notion that we can somehow thrive, even spiritually, independent of everything else in our world. Being able to see and share in the interconnectedness of our unique existence is rapidly becoming an ethical necessity.

Teaching and Learning Complexity

Israeli writer David Grossman movingly describes the way we are prone to surrender our selfhood rather than confront the horror of human violence. He names the creeping despair we feel of ever finding core truths within a “state of affairs that is so terrifying and deceptive and complex, both morally and practically.” We face the threat of our own willingness to not empathize with the pain of others and hence suspend moral judgment. If we cannot accept responsibility for the suffering of others, then we also face the danger of giving away our own moral agency and authority. We convince ourselves, “I’m better off leaving the task of thinking and doing and establishing moral norms in the hands of those who might ‘know better’” (2007, p.30). Grossman’s words reiterate the need to spark the intellectual and moral capacity in our students to face these difficult truths without retreating into apathy and numbness.

Are there ways in which we can help students to have the strength of character to see and experience the despair and the joys that are inherent in our nature rather than

become numb? Can we, together, cultivate an appreciation of the complexity of the human condition from which our own ethical stance can grow? Can we encourage students (and ourselves) to make the connections between thinking well and acting well? In response to this line of inquiry, service-learning is daring the ivory tower to let down its drawbridge and open to a greater reality.

Arnold Weinstein, of Brown University, writes, “What constitutes our own special plague [is] the dreadful condition of being locked into our perceptual system and hence locked out of everyone else’s. This is the death of love as well as the shrinkage of life” (2003, 394). Although he was not addressing the academy from which he himself springs—this is an apt description of an institutional pitfall in which the teacher feeds knowledge to passive students and they regurgitate for exams. Service-learning challenges traditional paradigms that may not be preparing students to face a complex world filled with gray areas and moral ambiguity. Using it to teach philosophy may help students to creatively engage, even embrace, these challenges.

The philosopher’s central task has often been to urge us to think critically and not be lulled into complacency. As Socrates knew, there will always be powerful forces that will us not to think, not to question. If we, as teachers, believe that education is about “liberating the potential of students to actualize the good as well as the true and the beautiful” (Strain, p.69), then should we not challenge ourselves in similar ways? We do not all have to die for the truth but we certainly may need to struggle a little more.

Philosopher Hannah Arendt adeptly states that, “a thinking being, rooted in his thoughts and his remembrances...has to live with himself, there will be limits to what he can permit himself to do, and these limits will not be imposed from the outside, but will be self-set” (2003, 101). We have to think for ourselves but this thinking must be based on broad exposure to multiple perspectives and sensitivity to the experience of others. Certainly we cannot actually teach people *how* to be ethical beings. But how does one develop these self-set limits and the strength to act from one’s own moral center, to be one’s own agent? But can we do more than teach *about* it? Can we create ways to experience and reflect, to make and feel important connections and build skills and knowledge?

Bridging Theory to Action

I have used service-learning for the past three years in my philosophy classes. When the word “moral” was added so that my courses also fulfilled the general education ethics requirement, I felt a little strange. I was, ironically, on *terra firma* with all kinds of existential questions (especially anything angst related), whereas formal ethical categories set me adrift on their vast sea of theory. But using service-learning and books that I was drawn to, I began, with my students, to see and experience the ways in which the personal meaning that each of us seek is ultimately intertwined with our moral stance in the world. As philosopher, John Dewey contends, moral growth does not happen in a vacuum, we grow and mature through interaction with our environment and other people (1963, p.62).

Developing intellectually and morally happens in a variety of contexts and on many different levels. Psychologist and ethicist Carol Gilligan made an important contribution to our current understanding of the limits of theory by showing that “women

develop their identity through ongoing relationships [and therefore] tend to interpret moral dilemmas not as a problem of conflicting rights but as a problem of conflicting responsibilities” (Liu, 2006, p.23). Gilligan believes that looking at a problem as “conflicting responsibilities rather than competing rights” requires a mode of thinking that is “contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract” (1982, p.19). Gilligan’s perspective acknowledges the ways in which, in addition to internalization of universal principles, our morality is formed through relation, through engagement with particular people and situations.

Service-learning pedagogy represents a de-centering, a necessary de-equilibration of habit that allows us to think afresh through the integration of practice and reflection. Synthetic academic categories, while convenient for teaching, do not offer a full account of the multiplicity of truths and sources of knowledge on which these categories actually rest. Service-learning also redistributes authority and suggests that the instructor is not the sole holder of responsibility for disseminating knowledge. Learning is exploratory and participatory. It is a complex and multi-leveled adventure that does not end at the classroom door or at commencement. Teaching moral philosophy as an intellectual and a visceral engagement helps students to interpret sophisticated concepts through their experience. I have been honored to be privy to many electric moments when these important connections are made. For example, this student movingly applies a textual idea to her service experience:

[Elizabeth] Bennett writes, “the ethical and political potential within suffering is more likely to be realized if one’s attention to suffering is infused by or remixed with the en-couraging experience of wonder”[(2001, p160)] . . . this quote rings true for me. In many cases we choose to continue doing certain things because we are so intrigued by them and it drives us to learn more about what scares us or makes us uncomfortable . . . since I started working for the AIDS project many things have changed . . . Two weeks ago I came in contact with a man who had come in to talk to his case worker . . . and while he was waiting he was sitting down in the lobby and started asking me questions; how long had I worked there? What my name was? . . . Just the fact that he was even acknowledging me when he himself seemed very tired and worn out made me not afraid [of people with AIDS] anymore. (Eileen Pedersen, fall 2006)

This student chose to work with the AIDS project because a friend of hers had died of AIDS. The last day of class she told us, “I realized that, towards the end, he wasn’t mad at the disease, he was mad at me for not seeing him anymore, for only seeing the disease.” By putting herself in a situation that she knew in advance would produce some personal discomfort, this student created the opportunity for deep learning on many levels.

Service-learning opens us to the “messiness” of a world that does not exist in neat categories. It dares instructors and students to experience the interplay between these two drives that make us human and offers the potential for greater humanity. We find that our intellects are nourished through scholarly texts and the meaning becomes synthesized, digested, through experience in the community. Through the process of developing

relationships we begin to experience the possibility of the overlap between personal fulfillment and our responsibilities to others.

This pedagogy also illuminates the difference between acknowledging a truth on an intellectual level and actually living that truth. Instructors are perhaps the ones who struggle with this more than students. In service-learning, the first challenge is to the teacher's ego. Can s/he share power with students and the people in the community and trust that knowledge will be constructed in a variety of different ways? It is a constant balancing act between academic and experiential content, guidance and letting go. Copernicus ushered us into modernity with the revelation that our planet is not the center of the universe, and service-learning equally de-centers the classroom universe. In this way students must also actively accept responsibility for their own learning and their accountability to others.

Judith Butler affirms that we must "recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human" (2005, 136). How can we be prepared to answer to the call that arrives unbidden, for which we can never be ready? Using service-learning is not a final answer (thankfully there are no "final" answers), but it does open us up, teachers and students, to experiences, thought, and dialogue that may help us to be prepared on more levels than a theory driven, lecture based class. Service-learning values the power of reflection to help make real the connections that do exist between theory and practice.

Student Voices

Religious philosopher John Hick's statement that, "We can only become persons through interactions with others," (1999, 35) sounds pretty straightforward, does it not? In fact, in Western society especially, the idea of being dependent on others for anything is a difficult realization. Yet this understanding is fundamental to moral growth and, in my experience, the recognition of the complexity and beauty of interconnection is the deepest kind of learning that occurs in my classes. It is the students themselves who best express the ways that service-learning helps them to come to terms with this reality. I am grateful to all the students who have so generously shared their learning with me. I admit to vicariously partaking in their revelations and am pleased that I have been afforded the opportunity for others to do the same.

One student beautifully illustrates the bridging of intellectual to service that happens through reflection. She begins with a quote from a class text that relates love and ethical being to the ability to see and experience the world beyond the limits of the self:

In his book Rethinking Freedom, C. Fred Alford discusses the philosopher Iris Murdoch and her idea that freedom, contrary to popular belief, is "neither money and power nor sleep and relaxation but opening one's eyes to the world around us. Therefore, the human goal is the freedom from fantasy [and] the realism of compassion" [(2005, 92-98)]. I live in a world of privilege, such that economic and physical hardship is unfathomable to me, despite my superficial

“compassion.” Suffering is something that happens outside my life—you might even say that I live in a fantasy. To have true compassion and to fully realize that there is more to the world outside your bubble of existence, one must “see it clearly”—i.e., experience it. This is what community work does. (Molly Sooper, “Breaking Through,” fall 2006)

Ethical balance is that transient point where thinking well and acting well come together through practice. We develop our own opinions and perceptions with the awareness of the ways that we are conditioned and tuned by culture. Philosophy reminds us to question our own assumptions and wakes us out of habitual perception. Molly aptly describes the experience of awakening to a world where, *“Stereotypes melt away, and so does illusion. And this is a difficult experience, because illusion is comforting”* (Molly Sooper, “Breaking Through,” fall 2006).

The other phenomenon that occurs in service-learning is a natural process that still seems miraculous on every occurrence: textual ideas that seemed cocooned in layers of academic references and language, producing glazed-over stares and student statements such as, “I have no idea what all these words mean,” later emerge formed and ready to fly. In the final papers, it becomes apparent that students are able to synthesize the meaning of abstract ideas with their experience in the community. Through practice, knowledge is integrated and the academic comes to life. A political science major writes:

How does my role as a volunteer help the Needle Exchange if it seems like I am only there for a quest of self-cultivation? In the last chapters of On Being Authentic, Guignon [(2004)] seems to finally tell us why authenticity is important. To have the authentic trait is not only a personal trial to achieve personal happiness but also to have values within the society as a whole. Public policy makers and people who take stands against injustice all seem to carry the traits of the authentic individual. (Jennifer Swenson, “Ethical Evolution,” fall 2006)

Connection after connection happens when we structure the service-learning experience as intentionally as possible while creating space for the unexpected, the events and the learning that we cannot plan for. A business student reflects:

Just as the curriculum became more alive to me, so did my perception of the world around me . . . When we hold certain expectations and goals for our own personal gain, it is easy to become blind-sighted and forget what is going on around us.” (Leticia Sandoval, “Reflection: Community Service and Personal Development,” fall 2006)

Our education rarely prepares us for that which we cannot control or calculate, but “messiness” is inherent to service-learning. Situations that are not ideal are learning opportunities as well; in fact, they often provide the crucial confrontation with our internal contradictions and important realizations come from the less than perfect experience. A student who found herself more engaged in class texts than her service,

uses content from both to come to a stunning awareness. In her final paper she writes:

In retrospect, I see that it was not the Youth Center's environment, or the people helping me, or the kids that go there, that made me feel like a stranger. It was my personal unrest with feeling like I don't have a purpose. When you feel like you don't have a purpose, it really makes you feel like an alien not only in the given setting but in your own mind as well. It leaves you seemingly blind, lost, and determined to find something to grab onto for stability, and usually the easiest way out is to release some of your anxiety on another person. . . . In an effort to reach out and be a part of something, I actually lost my own self-understanding, simply because the situation was foreign. (Casey Thorne, "Precarious Awe," spring 2007)

But as you can see, she has not lost anything but actually gained a new and significant self-understanding. She allowed herself to be destabilized and discovered the possibility of balancing the self-assertive, her purpose, her identity, with openness to the world that affects her deeply.

These brief excerpts of student writing are examples of how philosophy becomes embodied. It is lived in the classroom by students and teachers balancing the need to cultivate and assert their unique identity with the need to open to and accept the reality, the experience of the Other. Just as we cannot ultimately distinguish the separate elements that constantly come together to form our selfhood, neither can we separate out the ways in which learning is enriched by the combination of thinking and acting. For me, service-learning manifests ways to find that constantly renewable balance between the two drives that are contradictory or complementary, depending on the moment. Our craving to express our unique individual potential and our longing to experience connection with something larger than ourselves both present us with an opportunity for struggle and for joy and it is the conjunction of the two that helps us to express the morality and the meaning that we cannot help but seek.

Last fall, a student who worked with an organization that provides art programs for homeless children showed up for her service work and found the headquarters had burnt down. In the aftermath, it was the children's drawings and paintings, some barely visible on the fragile, water soaked paper, that they struggled hardest to save. She recounts: "The artwork had been stacked in huge, wet, ash-encrusted piles. We peeled it apart, page by page, and laid it out everywhere there was sun."

Certainly a crisis often brings us together and helps us to feel our own vulnerabilities and our collective strengths. But I do not believe that it was this isolated incident that caused the student to write the following words, instead, like the drawings that made the journey through the fire—she was already imprinted with the images of lives beyond her own:

I realized that I can still have a sense of self while trying to be selfless—that the relationship between me and my service must be reciprocal, and must be real It's not a self-sacrifice but a self-improvement, a self-development, an experience . . . a breakthrough. (Molly Sooper, "Breaking Through," fall 2006)

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