

Richard J. Bernstein and  
The Soul of Teaching

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Like many of you (I'm guessing), I've been rereading Dick's books in the months since we lost him. It's a bit like trying to travel back in time, trying to sit down again at the seminar table to learn from him. The books themselves seem transformed in his absence – suddenly heavier and bound in a way they had never been before. I've been wondering about this transmutation of words into last words and how to resist the feeling – and the fact – of closure.

It's not going to be easy, but I'm going to try to limit my invocations of Socrates because I always liked Dick so much more than I ever liked Socrates. But let me begin by admitting that I will forever associate Dick's teaching style with the opening lines of *The Phaedrus*: "Where are you going and where have you come from?"<sup>1</sup> I remember Dick reading this line in a seminar on *The Phaedrus* he co-taught with Claudia Baracchi at The New School in 1999.<sup>2</sup> I have been trying to keep his voice in my ear – a voice so distinctive in its pitch and intonation. He would often read aloud to us, interrupting himself, sometimes word by word, as he went. He had a strange way of inflecting the end of a sentence so that it felt open-ended, like a perpetual question. Holding the book in one hand or leaning over the table, he'd read with a syncopation and a Brooklyn accent all his own, smacking the table as an exclamation point. Sometimes he'd read in almost a whisper, and we'd all lean in. When he really loved a line, he'd read it over and over, asking us, "Did you hear that? Did you hear how beautiful that is?"

"Where are you going and where have you come from?" It's a simple yet profound question. It shows genuine concern for and curiosity about the other person – about their history and their sense of the future. Dick was genius at that double gesture of looking back while looking ahead – never mired in the past, never entranced by the future, but present, sober, awake. His teaching required us (his students) to study the history of philosophy. But it also invited us to make our own path. He wanted to know about our lives and our ideas. He wanted us to make something new. Perhaps for that reason, I always felt that Dick was more open to surprise than Socrates seemed to be. And maybe that's why I always think of Dick's teaching together with the word "adventure," a word I associate with Gadamer and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Phaedrus* in *Plato's Erotic Dialogues*, ed. William Cobb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) 87, 227a.

<sup>2</sup> Years later I would read Dick's essay, "The Romance of Philosophy," and discover these lines: "It was at Chicago that I discovered and fell in love with philosophy. And it was Plato's *Phaedrus* that turned me on. It is still my favorite piece of philosophy, and I never lost my love for the Platonic dialogues." Richard J. Bernstein, "The Romance of Philosophy," in *Pragmatic Encounters* (London: Routledge, 2016) 14.

his insistence that “every experience has something of an adventure about it.”<sup>3</sup>

But I will also admit that I never saw Dick as excited as when, one evening at the Cedar Bar after our seminar, I told him I was thinking of making a short movie of *The Phaedrus*. It wasn't really serious, but I imagined Dick playing Socrates and riding a motorcycle over the Brooklyn Bridge (towards Brooklyn) with Phaedrus in a sidecar. I'll always regret that we didn't film that scene. And I'll always remember Dick's face lighting up at the idea. Years later, I would read his description of Socrates in *Ironic Life* and momentarily mistake it for Dick's own biography: “the exemplar of the lover of wisdom – a wisdom concretely manifested in his everyday life.”<sup>4</sup>

I always and only knew Dick as a teacher – as my teacher. Philosophy and teaching were so fully incarnated in him that I wouldn't know how to separate the two. But teaching was also something that Dick worried about, increasingly so over the years. Already in 1971, in *Praxis & Action*, he wrote “The time is ripe for philosophers to take off the blinders that have prevented them from learning from each other and to escape the provincialism that has cramped philosophizing in the recent past.”<sup>5</sup> Forty-five years later, in *Ironic Life* he wrote the following:

Today, insofar as philosophy is a professional academic discipline, the theoretical style has become so dominant that many philosophers scarcely recognize any alternative – and even think (anachronistically) that philosophy has always been such a theoretical discipline.<sup>6</sup>

As an antidote to the theoretical style, Dick invoked Whitehead's idea of “the rhythm of education,” a theory of education (and human psychology) demarcated by three recurring stages: 1) romance, 2) precision, and 3) generalization. Dick, following Whitehead, did not think that these stages were ordered in terms of increasing

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<sup>3</sup> Gadamer continues, “But what is an adventure? An adventure is by no means just an episode... An adventure interrupts the customary course of events but is positively and significantly related to the context which it interrupts. Thus an adventure lets life be felt as a whole, in its breadth and in its strength.” Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2000: 69). I studied *Truth and Method* in a seminar with Dick in the fall of 2001, our second meeting scheduled for September 11th. I'm not sure Dick ever realized how important he was for all of us that term – his steady enthusiasm for philosophy at a moment when it felt the world was falling apart.

<sup>4</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, *Ironic Life* (New York: Polity, 2016) 105.

<sup>5</sup> Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis & Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971) 305.

<sup>6</sup> Bernstein, *Ironic Life*, 102-33.

importance or that one could surmount a given stage and definitively leave the others behind. Education is more like a round-about than a one-way street. Dick worried that philosophy was mired in the last two stages (precision and generalization), without adequate attention to the first (romance). But without romance, philosophy loses its animating principle, its seductive power, and its connection with life as it is lived. Without romance, we're left with what Whitehead named "wooden futility,"<sup>7</sup> dry and disjoint ideas – no passion, no warmth.

Lamenting the lack of romance in philosophy and the increasingly monolithic, bureaucratic image of the professional philosopher, Dick wrote:

I do think there is something worrying about the growing academic professionalization of philosophy and the way we train students in philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

Dick was always worried about one-sided, dogmatic thinking. In *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now*, he warned, "The tendency toward ideological unanimity – the displacing of different perspectives on a common world with a single 'truth' of one ideology – is the most ominous tendency in the modern world."<sup>9</sup> Dick's life's work revolved around injecting a pluralist spirit into problems that had ossified or had lost touch with reality. As far as teaching was concerned, he worried about practices and institutions that would entrench students in a single tradition or career path, ones that would keep them inflexibly bent to the page (or to the screen) rather than nimble and alert – ready to react or to roam. Therefore, in addition to the dominant theoretical style of philosophizing, Dick advocated for other styles. Romance? Yes. But in this, as in everything else, he was a maximal pluralist. The more kinds of philosophizing, the better. And he always seemed to be on the lookout for new styles, for unique, under-appreciated, creative spirits who might not fit the mold but who might push philosophy to be or to do something it had not yet been or done before.

Dick's thoughts about the dangerous and limiting professionalization of philosophy echo some of the same concerns William James voiced in his famous 1903 essay "The PhD Octopus." James, writing about the arduous PhD examinations and

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<sup>7</sup> Whitehead writes, "Lack of attention to the rhythm and character of mental growth is the main source of wooden futility in education." Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1967) 17.

<sup>8</sup> Bernstein, *Ironic Life*, 124.

<sup>9</sup> Bernstein, *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now?* (New York: Polity, 2018) 40.

requirements at Harvard and the problem of attaching too much importance to the conferral of a PhD degree, asked, “Will anyone pretend for a moment that the doctor’s degree is a guarantee that its possessor will be successful as a teacher?”<sup>10</sup> He continued, “Notoriously his moral, social, and personal characteristics may utterly disqualify him for success in the classroom; and of these characteristics his doctor’s examination is unable to take any account whatever.”<sup>11</sup> In a final passage, James urged that American universities should “guard against ...officialism...snobbery and insincerity...[and] make it plain that what they live for is to help men’s souls...”<sup>12</sup>

*Souls.* It’s not a word we hear very much today. But the idea that education has to do with nourishing and guiding the soul is something that both Dick and James believed in – both of them against the tide of institutionalized academia in their own times. Both thought of teaching as a spiritual calling (and of philosophy, as Pierre Hadot described it, as a spiritual exercise and “a way of life”).<sup>13</sup> In *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas also connected teaching with the soul, writing, “the soul open[s] in the marvel of teaching.”<sup>14</sup> Dick had substantial disagreements with Levinas, but he shared the sense of teaching as something crucial, ethical, and marvelous.

There was a time when philosophers spoke of the soul as something that could be turned in one direction or another. Plato envisioned the soul as a chariot pulled by an obedient and an unruly horse: “a team of winged horses and their winged charioteer.”<sup>15</sup> Aristotle provided a picture of the soul as sedimented into multiple

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<sup>10</sup> William James, “The PhD Octopus,” *William James Writings 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuclick (New York: Library Classics of the United States, Inc: 1987) 1114.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1114.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1117.

<sup>13</sup> Talking about a conflict between philosophy and the teaching of philosophy, Hadot offered a remark one could imagine Bernstein also making: “Ever since I started doing philosophy, I’ve always believed that philosophy was a concrete act, which changed our perception of the world, and our life: not the construction of a system. It is a life, not a discourse.” Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1995) 279.

<sup>14</sup> Levinas also insisted that “teaching is a way for truth to be produced such that it is not my work, such that I could not derive it from my own interiority.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 181, 295. Dick also ascribed to a collaborative, communal sense of truth-making. I always thought of him as a model collaborator – one who never said no or turned away from a new idea but instead stood ready with a perpetual “yes, and...”

<sup>15</sup> Plato, *The Phaedrus*, in *Plato’s Erotic Dialogues*, 104, 246b ff.

layers overlapping with the potentialities of plants and nonhuman animals.<sup>16</sup> The soul was thought to be the seat of reason, speech, and thought, but also a site of growth, desire, and spirit. The project of education consisted of *tuning* the soul to itself – a project of listening to what a particular soul should or could become, and urging it toward that goal like a seed toward the light. Education was also a project of harmonization – finding ways to tune souls to each other and to temper the vying forces at work within a soul, especially in the souls of those (like the soldiers returning from combat in *Republic*) who suffered the most or endured the hardest things – those James later identified as “sick souls.”<sup>17</sup>

Dick reanimated that ancient wisdom of teaching as related to the soul. He knew that souls are singular and thrive under disparate conditions. He knew that souls change over time and that what animated a given soul at one time, might not in the future. Dick brought to his own teaching a psychoanalytic awareness of “the deep ambivalence that marks the human psyche,”<sup>18</sup> as well as a pragmatic sensibility for fallibilism, and a democratic commitment to communities of inquiry. That is to say, he knew his students were complex individuals who would react to texts in different ways, and he encouraged all of us to be open to multiple interpretations, to learn from one another, and to work together. He did this not from a position of remove, but always in the fray, open to being challenged himself, wondering aloud about a past commitment and its relevance given new facts, and inviting all of us to make distinctions, to be sharp and critical – without being mean.

That sense of discipline coupled with humor, tempered by love, was so distinctive in Dick. He was not easy on us. He demanded a lot. But he never lost sight of the person, the souls in the room. Philosophy was always connected to life, pinned down into the fabric of particular souls. I never thought of Dick as a religious person, but a Jewish sense of *mitzvah* – actions, deeds – animated all of his being. In the Prologue

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<sup>16</sup> Aristotle argues that different kinds of souls partake in one or several potentialities of nutrition, perception, desire, mobility, and thought. He describes an ascending scale of biological/psychological complexity from plants and their nutritive souls to animals and their multi-part, potentially intellectual (perceiving, desiring, imagining, listening, thinking), souls. Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. Mark Shiffman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011) 53, 414b ff.

<sup>17</sup> James details the “sick soul” in lectures VI and VII of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, juxtaposing it to “healthy mindedness” as a “more morbid way of looking at the situation,” indicative of “those persons who cannot so swiftly throw off the burden of the consciousness of evil, but are congenitally fated to suffer from its presence.” William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) 112, 114.

<sup>18</sup> Bernstein, *Radical Evil* (New York: Polity, 2002) 136.

to *The Pragmatic Turn*, Dick explained that the early America Pragmatists “showed the critical role that philosophy can play in guiding our conduct, enriching our everyday experience, and furthering ‘creative democracy.’”<sup>19</sup> Dick followed their lead, bringing a sense of the political urgency of ideas to every discussion. This held all of us to a different and higher standard than we were used to in a typical academic philosophy classroom. No jargon. No grandstanding. So what if you were brilliant. Were you good?

Though the word “pedagogy” was in the title of the panel for which this paper was first drafted,<sup>20</sup> “pedagogy” seems like the wrong word to associate with Dick—too stiff and self-important. Teaching sounds more pedestrian, more American. It is painstaking and common and slow. It’s what happens in Kindergarten and in Graduate School. It happens at home and at work. It transpires anywhere there is a concerted effort of understanding, where two or more souls convene to talk or to think together, to arrive somewhere they could not have imagined by themselves. Dewey wrote about the importance of viewing education as relating to the whole person and extending from school outward into every sphere of public life, stressing that a student must “add to the decencies and graces of civilization wherever he is.”<sup>21</sup> He went on to compare holistic education to learning how to swim, writing, “The only way to prepare for social life is to engage in social life.”<sup>22</sup>

But that is the challenge: how to make the classroom coextensive with social life, rather than a space of remove, cut off from the din the world? How to dive in? I remember loving the porous quality of the building at 65 Fifth Avenue when I was in graduate school at The New School, riding an escalator to the second floor. Everything about the place seemed energetically geared toward the city and the wider world. Dick was a big part of that and of keeping philosophy tuned and responsive to the crises of our time. Dick was – over and over – on time for his own time.

I think we might agree that philosophy and teaching are in disarray in America today. Inequities, divisions, and lack of community exacerbate old grievances and fuel new ones. It’s easy to despair about the state of higher education, to feel that philosophy has run its course, or to submit to the leveling trends of quantification and

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<sup>19</sup> Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (New York: Polity, 2013) x.

<sup>20</sup> This paper was first delivered at *A Life in Thought: A Series of Conversations in Celebration of the Life and Work of Richard J. Bernstein*, October 14, 2002, The New School for Social Research. The panel, titled “Philosophy As Pedagogy,” included myself, Roy Ben-Shai, and Judith Friedlander.

<sup>21</sup> John Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1990), MW 270.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

consolidation. But philosophy still lies at the root of life's big questions. What is a good life? Where do the dead go? How can we be friends? There are as many answers as there are lives, and, as educators, we are tasked with creating the room and the atmosphere to give souls air, to learn from the past as well as from one another, and to face the unknown with curiosity, empathy, and courage. Dick tirelessly defended American Pragmatism against criticisms that it was naively hopeful or fuzzy. Perhaps one of his greatest legacies is showing us that teaching is itself a form of active, earthbound hope.

Especially in the chaos and isolation of these last pandemic years, I've leaned into the memory of Dick's teaching – the memory of the focus and energy of his classroom, remembering what it is to find a banister in thinking together, to hold something in common, to read aloud, and to build community where and how we can. I've tried to think about teaching as care for the soul. Dick was always known as someone who brought disparate thinkers and traditions together. He was a uniter, a magician, a flare. He reminded us of the eros in education, of our souls as worthy of love, our love as necessary to thought, and our thought as tied to action.

In his absence, I am left casting about for the joyous affirmation Dick supplied, the *yes* to more philosophy, to more art, more family, more eros...that magical exuberance in the face of a life that, to me, has sometimes felt frenetic and too much. A shake of his white head. "You can do more than you think you can," he would say. And I knew he was right, even if I didn't know how to do it.

Preparing these thoughts, I spread all of Dick's books on my table. I found an inscription in *The Abuse of Evil*: "to Megan and Nick, the best of friends." And flipping through, I found, on page 183, a smear of blood, remembering suddenly that Dick had a cut on his hand, a papercut probably, when he signed the book and handed it to me several years ago in upstate New York – in the place where he seemed to me the most alive. Carol was searching for a Band-Aid, and he was waving her off, insisting he didn't need one. It's all there – the tenderness and toughness of his thinking and his teaching, his friendship, his finitude. A reminder of philosophy as embodied. A smudge of mortality. A reminder that, in the soul's "bandaged moments," I was lucky enough to find a teacher who knew something about the healing of wounds.<sup>23</sup> Dick,

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<sup>23</sup> Emily Dickinson, "The Soul has Bandaged Moments - / When too appalled to stir - / She feels some ghastly Fright come up / And stop to look at her -..." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998) 385. Dick used the expression "healing of wounds" in the title of his 1988 Presidential Address for the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, "Pragmatism, Pluralism, and The Healing of Wounds."



standing there at the threshold, asking us for the truth, urging us onward with excitement and affection. I can almost hear him, decisive and joyful, echoing Socrates's last words to Phaedrus: "Let's go."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Plato, *The Phaedrus* in *Plato's Erotic Dialogues*, 137, 297c.

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