

Farewell to My Mentor:  
Bernstein, Gadamerian Dialogue, and  
Inspiration for Philosophical Counseling

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Since I heard the news of Richard Bernstein's passing, I have been caught up in a kind of emotional time travel. I've been deeply immersed in memories of my first semester at the New School, when we met, and my many years as his student. I've been going over the ups and downs of my career as a philosophy professor and all the times I'd hear his voice inside my head, keeping me company with jokes, stories, encouragement, and his mantras about how to read Plato, Hegel, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein. And then my thoughts stray to the conversations I'll never get to have with him, and to the blank space in the world that used to be filled with so much exuberance. How do I capture the spirit of Richard Bernstein in these short reflections? How do I capture what he meant to me and what is now lost? In classic Bernstein form, I guess I'll try telling you a story.

### **Beginnings with Bernstein**

When I arrived at the New School in 1998, I had never been to New York before. I wasn't quite sure I was equipped for life in the big city. A stranger taught me to look for the Twin Towers as I came up from the subway to get my bearings. I suppose my confusion was obvious. I started grad school un-scholarshipped and on a tight budget. But I was on a mission. I was pursuing philosophy for love.

I had little idea of what graduate school would demand of me. There was not much guidance for new grad students back then—you were free to sink, swim, or float as your skills and personal finances allowed. So, I clung to any students ahead of me willing to tell me their secrets of survival.

The first time I spoke directly with Prof. Bernstein was after one of our department's Thursday night talks, when we'd all take our conversations to the Cedar Tavern. I was sitting next to him—a seat of honor that was clearly some sort of mistake for me to fill. I was red-faced and hesitant. We both talked to the person on the other side of us for some time. But then . . . he turned to me and said, "You gonna eat that pickle?" And I said, "I was saving it for you."

My relationship with Bernstein started out very simply—over a pickle. We had little idea who the other was. I hadn't heard the legends about the man and his work yet, which I'd come to know from my classmates later on. I was coming from a small school in Oregon. There were no "big names" in the philosophy world that I was connected to—no one Bernstein might know. And it didn't matter. He was immediately friendly, gave me one of his big grins and a shake of the shoulder, and he talked with me in a way that made me feel like maybe I could fit in to this totally

foreign environment.

So, we came to know each other as student and teacher. My concerns weren't particularly "academic" at the time. I just liked to read and write and think about big questions. I was mostly a quiet 23-year-old looking to philosophy to help me understand my own struggles and all the abuses of power in the world that went unchecked. I really didn't think of myself as a "scholar." And frankly, Bernstein never really tried to mold me into one.

He was one of the few people in the world who seemed to think that I had what I needed, and that I should just go ahead and do my thing – read the books, write the papers, "definitely do the Ph.D." I barely knew what to make of his confidence in me. Even now, when I think of all the times in my life when I've been treated like I was of the wrong pedigree, or not worthy of some important person's time, I am amazed at the confidence he had in me and the generosity he showed.

I guess he liked my first "I don't know what I'm doing" graduate paper in his Pragmatism class. I think he actually liked that I didn't realize that there were certain things you're not supposed to say or do in an academic paper. Perhaps I was a bit irreverent, or just naïve. I said and did them anyway. They surprised him, made him laugh, and slap me on the shoulder (hard). His jubilant reactions started to make me wonder about this guy. He was different. I started watching him.

### **A Philosopher in Action**

In New York City, I was getting my first crash course in academic culture. Too shy to speak up most of the time, I did a lot of watching . . . watching the guest speakers come in and out each week, watching the advanced students who interacted so seriously with each other, watching professors carefully selecting who they would talk to, watching the use of esoteric language, the rigid body language, the jockeying for first place in the debate, the pressure on moderators to give inordinate amounts of time to certain participants (um, is there a question in there?), the public displays of ego, the sparring . . . and the beyond belief levels of abstraction from real-life problems that I was hoping to solve. To tell you the truth, I was worried. I didn't know if this world was for me, but I loved philosophy and didn't know of any other way I could participate in it. So, I stayed.

In the middle of this whole scene of New York academics . . . there's this guy. With his face in his hands and his glasses cockeyed on that big head of bushy white hair. Just listening. Patiently waiting. Eyes shut tight.

Finally, he'd raise a finger and in about three or four sentences the whole two hours were wrapped up in a nutshell, the major themes laid out, the strengths and weaknesses of the various sides summed up, their common interests pointed out . . . and then the big finale: "I want the truth!" (For a couple of years the finale morphed into "Where's the beef?" with a big fist bang on the table.) And then some gentler prodding, which I've come to hear in my head every time I try to put words to paper: "What do you want to *do* here?" "What's the *difference* you want to make?"

In mere minutes the prior two hours (which I dare say few were actually following) were made meaningful. Concrete. Grounded in something that I could care about. It cut right through the bullshit (which, of course, was devastating to the bullshitters). And it nurtured the quiet attempts in the room to get at the heart of what really mattered.

Bernstein showed me there was a way to be a philosopher in a room full of academics. And now I'm sitting here across the country wondering if I'll ever see anything so rare again. It's an aching kind of loss – the loss of losing your guiding light and wondering if you'll be able to find the path on your own.

### **In the Classroom**

It was the fall of 2001. Bernstein's seminar on Hans-Georg Gadamer was beginning. I was in the class, not because I knew the first thing about Gadamer, but because by then I had learned I should take any seminar that Bernstein was leading. The slow and methodical way he'd lead a class through a single text over the course of a semester—laced with stories from his life, the other classes he was teaching, and current political concerns—was unmatched.

We read the introduction to *Truth and Method*, and I thought—man, I am so screwed. This Gadamer guy assumes I know the whole history of philosophy. I can hear Bernstein saying with the greatest confidence on the first day, "Hey Monica, why don't you take the week on Romantic hermeneutics. You know something about Romanticism, don't you?" And despite my look of abject fear and squeaky reply—"um, I'm not sure"—there I was, agreeing. All it took was another big slap on the back and the words "come on, I think you've got a knack for this stuff." I was about to write and present a paper to the class on two words I could not define to save my life. And who the hell was Schleiermacher?

But here's the thing. Bernstein had this way of making me believe I could do it. I used to wonder, what was this "knack" he thought I had? What was he going to

do when he found out there's no knack? But if he believed, then I was determined to deliver—through sheer force of will, if the knack was lacking.

This dynamic remained central to our relationship. He'd say you're going to do a great job, and I'd go away and work my ass off until it was good enough to show him. The same thing happened with the dissertation when he became my advisor. And in 2006, just when I thought I was done with "assignments," he said at the end of my defense "Congratulations Dr. Vilhauer, let's get this thing published."<sup>1</sup> Dang. He really had my number. Just a few words of his faith would light a fire in me.

I can think of two people in my life who I actually wanted to make proud. He was one. And perhaps it was not just because he believed in me in the areas of my life where I felt horribly insecure about myself. It was because he embodied that thing I really wanted most. The life of a "real philosopher." I couldn't yet give an account of what I meant by that, but I was sure that I knew it when I saw it.

He lived it with joyful energy, depth, care, generosity, and friendship. It showed in the way he painstakingly prepped for seminar, in the way he took my half-baked, yet sincere questions seriously, in the way he drew different philosophical traditions into meaningful conversation with each other, in the way he connected what we were reading to urgent political problems, and in the way he greeted his old students and colleagues with so much fondness. I trusted Bernstein because he showed me he knew about that thing that was most important to me—a real philosopher's life—even if I couldn't yet formulate what I meant by that.

That fall in our Gadamer class, a shift started to happen. I realized that what Gadamer was describing as a "genuine dialogue" in *Truth and Method* was at the heart of what I felt (but couldn't yet explain) was central to the life of a real philosopher. There was an uncanny connection between what we were reading and the way Bernstein operated.

### **Genuine Dialogue**

Gadamer described genuine dialogue as having this playful character. A true conversation was a spontaneous, back-and-forth adventure of sorts. It had a life of its

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<sup>1</sup> My dissertation on Gadamer was revised and turned into a book entitled *Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other*, which was published in 2010 by Lexington Books. Holding the book in my hands for the first time and reading Bernstein's quote on the back was one of the purest joys of my life.

own. You had to give yourself over to it and let the subject matter lead. You couldn't try to control it or dominate the other—in fact, domination and control would kill it. It was not a competition; winning was not the goal. Genuine dialogue was a common quest to understand the truth of some subject matter together, to learn from each other's experiences, and to share horizons of understanding in the process. As Gadamer put it: "To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were."<sup>2</sup>

This approach to dialogue corresponded closely with Bernstein's style in class. Our interpretive conversation about the text had a movement of its own. I recall times when Bernstein wanted to ditch the syllabus and let the ideas lead us places that our particular group needed to go. The character of the conversation was dependent on the questions, struggles, and intellectual context of the participants. How different this experience was from a lecture, and how different it was from a debate between rivals trying to prove their superiority. How much more engaging it made the material and the experience of being together in a room working through our concerns as a group.

In our study of Gadamerian dialogue, and in my experience of participating in a dialogical classroom, I started to realize there were ethical dimensions to this whole play-process of philosophical conversation that were key for what it meant to really *do* philosophy with integrity, and to really *live* the philosopher's life.

A genuine conversation could only happen when participants approached each other with a good will to understand what the other was saying. The conversation wouldn't work if you treated the other person as wrong (even before they spoke) and if you were concerned only with how you would convince them that you were right. Each interlocutor needed to be willing to see the truth in what the other was saying, even if it contradicted their own preconceptions. And that willingness demanded a unique kind of openness to the other, and a kind of courage: the courage to be affected and transformed by the other and what they had to say.

A genuine conversation also could only happen when participants approached each other with respect—as unique beings with their own experiential knowledge and their own contribution to make to the unfolding of truth. A genuine conversation meant taking your interlocutor seriously, not objectifying them as some sort of specimen to predict and control, and not psychoanalyzing them as if their speech was just an expression of some pathology, personal trauma, or childhood hang-up. No, it

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<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2000) 379.

meant listening to the other as someone who was making a claim about the world. A claim to truth.

And to do all of this, you'd need to start with a particular kind of value system – one in which you honor truth and the other human being over and above “being right.”

That was it. I was finally starting to formulate something that I'd long had a feeling about but couldn't say. To live the life of a philosopher you needed to make two important commitments: to truth and to “the other.” And you needed to show those commitments in speech and deed.

That Gadamer seminar took place the semester of the 9/11 attacks. In the weeks and months following the attacks, the challenge in the air against philosophies of good will, dialogue, and openness to “the other” could not have been stronger. The rhetoric of evil, insanity, suspicion, and the impotence of conversation in the face of violence filled the streets and the nightly news. The charges of “sympathizer” were hurled at anyone who wanted to understand or make sense of what had happened. Out of a semester shocked by the greatest violence I had ever experienced, a commitment grew in me to the I-Thou relationship, to conversation, to listening and taking the “other” seriously.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it was my own method of resistance: it was a commitment to re-humanize what felt like a dehumanized world. Gadamer's theory and Bernstein's conversational practice gave me two guiding lights.

### **Moving Beyond the Academy**

I spent my academic research life, from dissertation to tenure,<sup>4</sup> focused primarily on the theory of genuine dialogue and its ethical dimensions. And I spent my teaching life determined to create dialogical communities in which students could learn to encounter texts and each other with openness, curiosity, and respect. I finally got to a point where I realized much of the work I wanted to do, much of the philosophical life I wanted to lead and share with others, I just couldn't make happen in a university setting. I was ready to leave academia. And I was filled with anxiety about telling Bernstein.

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<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, Bernstein's interests turned to questioning the absolute notions of evil that were so prevalent in the aftermath of 9/11. He started to draft the text that would become *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11*, published in 2005 by Polity.

<sup>4</sup> I earned tenure at Roanoke College in Virginia in 2012.

I had wanted to live a life like the one he had shown me. I suppose I was ashamed—after all the years, all the sweat, all the struggle—that I couldn't make it work. I know my academic career looked as if it were “on track” from the outside, and I know he was proud of that. But it didn't work from the inside. I was squeezed dry. I was discouraged and demoralized. I was in mourning. And I didn't want to disappoint him with this truth.

I finally got to see Bernstein at a conference in his honor at Muhlenberg College in 2015.<sup>5</sup> After my presentation, we took some time to talk. My voice shook, my eyes teared up . . . he had never seen me like that before. He listened very carefully, very seriously, to the struggles I had experienced trying to make an academic career sustainable and fulfilling. I was burnt out and my heart was broken.

He told me he realized how lucky he had been in his academic career. I wagered his success and happiness had been about more than luck. In school, I remember watching Bernstein leave for the weekend with his bag filled with papers, dissertations, and books that he'd have to review in two days, all while being prepped for class, writing his own books, and serving as Chair or Dean. I didn't know how he did it. But he insisted that the conditions had always been right in the classroom, and he knew he had been lucky. I think that's what always kept him going back for more. I knew I needed to find a way to create those conditions to live the kind of philosophical life I wanted. But my suspicion was that I'd have to do it beyond the university walls.

As I looked at my shoes wondering what the longest-standing mentor I had ever had outside my own parents was going to think, he said: “You have to do what your integrity tells you is right, even if it goes against the tide.” I knew in that moment that he saw me. He supported me as more than an academic. I hugged him and said “I'm really happy to hear you say that . . . I thought maybe I could move into your basement?” He roared . . . and in that moment everything was going to be ok. That was the last time I saw his face.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Second Annual 'Thinking the Plural' Richard J. Bernstein Symposium, "Feminism & Pluralism,"* Muhlenberg College, September 25, 2015.



## Philosophical Counseling

Some years later I created a small business called *Curious Soul Philosophy* that focuses on practicing philosophy as a way of life. I offer philosophical counseling, workshops, and retreats for adults interested in the ways philosophy can help with everyday struggles and big life-quests. I still feel Bernstein with me in this new venture, and I often wonder what he might think of it.

In philosophical counseling, I get the opportunity to engage in that authentic, human-to-human dialogue that we talked about all the way back in the Gadamer seminar. People come into sessions wrestling with problems of meaning and purpose, confused about their core beliefs and values, grappling with the difficulties of change and changing identity, and struggling with freedom and authenticity in the face of cultural expectations and social power.

Our conversations have the feel of those genuine dialogues that I had wanted so much to re-create in my academic career, but just couldn't find the right conditions for. They are serious, and take the other seriously; but they are also playful, creative, and adventurous. They most definitely have a life of their own. They are not competitive debates. They don't pigeon-hole the other as a "type." They don't pathologize or diagnose the other. And they don't try to control the other or the outcome. They are grounded in good will, openness, and respect. They are attempts to deal with life's big problems by coming to a deeper understanding of the world and the human condition.

In philosophical counseling, we approach life problems by identifying and examining old assumptions, taking a look at their effects on our lives, trying out alternative ways of thinking (with help from the history of philosophy), finding creative ways to put new insights into practice, and building a more intentional and empowered life. One of my areas of emphasis is helping those who have endured deep alienation in their lives to reclaim their freedom and sense of personhood. My most rewarding experience has been to help gymnasts who have grown up in toxic training environments to examine the value systems and power dynamics that held them captive, encouraging them to find their own voices and make their own choices for freer, healthier, and more fulfilling futures. It's the sort of "philosophy in action" I had hoped to be a part of when I first chose to attend the New School.

When I think of the way I've come to do philosophy outside of the academy, I hear so many of Bernstein's mantras from our Gadamer class ring in my mind. "You have to be open to the other." "You have to find what's TRUE in what the other says."

“Reaching an understanding is always in principle possible.” “Understanding, interpretation, and application are three aspects of the same process – don’t forget the application!” Fist bang.

I think I finally found the right conditions for the philosophical life I was looking for. I wish I could tell him. Mostly, I think he would get a kick out of it, make some joke about Socrates not being an academic, and punch me in the shoulder. There’s nothing I’d like more.