

The Gift of Voice

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1.

Dick Bernstein was *all* of it: a first-rate scholar, a powerful thinker, a master conversationalist, a steadfast friend. In all these ways he was a gift to his students, colleagues and friends: a voice to be heard as well as a person to be admired and liked. For me, he was first and foremost a teacher. As a teacher, his most characteristic gesture was his habit of rolling up his sleeves at the beginning of class, signifying not just “Let’s get underway” but, more especially, “Let’s get serious.” By this latter expression he meant *let’s do philosophy together*. He was saying in effect: “I won’t lecture to you as if I already know what is being said in the assigned text, pontificating and pronouncing”; instead, “let’s open up our common enterprise, which is talking out together the primary issues at stake in today’s reading. I, Richard Bernstein, don’t pretend to know exactly what is signified in the reading, though I certainly have some idea; but I’m not going to voice this understanding until I hear from each of you what you make of the passage on which we are now focusing. Mr. Casey, what do you think is being said here?”

At age 83, I can still hear his voice as it shaped my most formative class at Yale. I and fellow classmates were there together to *hear each other say out loud what each of us thought was the issue and what the author of the assigned reading – be it Hegel, or Dewey, or Aristotle – was trying to say*. We were there to try to find the right spoken words that expressed what the written word intimated in an often dense—if not clandestine—manner. Under our teacher’s forthright direction, the class was moving from the receptive silence of listening to an outright speaking – as outright as we sophomores, aspirants to *sophrosyne*, could manage to be.

We would not have spoken up had Dick Bernstein not set the stage for our finding our voices – voices at once individual and collective. *His* voice was Socratic: “What does ‘ethical’ mean in this passage? What does ‘knowledge’ connote? Above all, *what is at stake here?*” Bernstein conveyed the excitement and naiveté of a new reader, even when he was quite familiar with the passage being discussed. He knew it – he was already acquainted with it – but he did not claim to know just what it meant. He conveyed by his own demeanor that an integral part of what was at stake is: “What difference does it make for *you*, the first-time naïve reader?” The existential tenor of Dick’s insistent questioning of each of us in turn was evident: it was as if our responses really mattered, not just in the class at the moment but in our lives beyond the classroom.

At play in this intensely dialogical scene was William James' axiom: "the truth is what works" – what works for me, in my life and in the lives of others.¹ Disembodied and inactive claims were of secondary significance; at play around the table in the second floor of Connecticut Hall was always the question: "What difference does the claim being made in this particular passage make – in the praxis of your everyday existence, including the praxis of thinking intensely and clearly about things of personal and political import in that existence?"

It all mattered to Dick Bernstein. He was never bored, not even with the most tepid response from a fellow student or one's own faltering take on a given passage from the assigned reading – a take in which one had little if any confidence. It was always interesting to Dick, who bought out what was important in what one was saying so awkwardly. He orchestrated a situation in which everyone around the table was saying something significant, contributing to a sym-phony of voices which Dick brought out like a philosophical maestro conducting a small but dedicated band. This was *a band apart*: in the classroom with Bernstein, we left our daily concerns and tribulations behind in order to focus together on *things that mattered* – mattered far more than we suspected when we were reading certain passages on our own in preparation for class: when we often found ourselves baffled, asking ourselves such things as: What can Peirce mean by Secondness? What is Substance for Aristotle? These questions, arising from our comparatively passive reading, became vividly alive in a Bernstein seminar: he brought them alive, alive not only in us but also in himself. For he himself was always fully engaged; his voice did not merely encourage us to speak individually but, joining with ours, generated an intense and memorable dialogue.

Dick's voice was a force of its own, making him the unique person he was for us as our inspiring teacher. But he was not interested in leading the class, much less dominating it. His concern was with bringing each of us not just to express our individual take on the text but to join with others to form a multivocal chorus. Far from forcing each of us to speak, he invited us to find our own voice in the clamor of the classroom. *Viva voce!* His aim was to bring our otherwise mute and stifled voices into a conjoint articulation that would never have happened without his probing

¹ In *Pragmatism*, James writes, "[The pragmatist's] only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted." William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907) 80.

presence.²

2.

We tend to think of raised voices as belonging to political protests and interpersonal arguments. Bernstein's effort was to get us students to raise our voices as integral to understanding philosophical issues. To talk aloud and in the presence of fellow students was a way of lifting the shroud of secrecy and silence from our private readings of the dense prose of the likes of Hegel and Nietzsche, Kant, and Dewey (all of whom we read in that same sophomore seminar in 1958-9).

Such coming-to-voice was also to adumbrate their import for our daily lives: their "practical bearings" in Peirce's phrase. However, this was not a matter of discerning the "take-away" or "pay-off" of philosophical doctrines. It was not a form of philosophical therapy. Bernstein's aim was not for his students to begin to lead more successful lives by offering "rules for action" outside the classroom. The pragmatism here at stake was more a matter of "how to make our ideas clear"—how to find voice for them—in the title of an essay by Peirce that we read together.³ The implication was that if we could do this, more effective action would ensue. It did for Bernstein himself, who went to Mississippi in 1964 as part of the Freedom March.⁴ And as it did for Martin Luther King, Jr., whom Dick invited to give a memorable talk

² The title of the Eastern APA presidential address I gave in 2010 was "Finding Your Voice in Philosophy." Dick Bernstein was in the front row of those attending, and afterwards he sprang forward to offer a single word: "Beautiful!" Dick's own presidential address of several years before, "Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds," had characteristically focused on how the warring factions in philosophy – analytic philosophy and continental philosophy -- needed to hear each other out more fully and openly. He lived out this committed pluralism in philosophy in myriad ways, one of which was his respecting my own path to phenomenology despite its being far from his own proclivity. Edward S. Casey, "Finding Your Voice in Philosophy," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (November 2010), pp. 27-44. Richard J. Bernstein, "Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Nov. 1989) pp. 5-18.

³ Charles Sanders Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in *Chance, Love, and Logic: Philosophical Essays*, Ed. Morris R. Cohen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998) 32 - 60.

⁴ For Dick's account of this experience and its ongoing relevance in his life, see "Democratic Hope," in Richard J. Bernstein, *Pragmatic Encounters* (New York: Routledge, 2017) 100 - 112.

in Dwight chapel on a Friday evening of my freshman year at Yale.⁵ Dick's encomium of King that evening made it clear that he saw an inherent link between King's dissertation at Boston University on Hegel and his political activism of the late 1950s in Georgia and Alabama. A link but not a deduction. It is better to come to political activism with a clarified philosophical mind and articulate voice as well as with concerted affective force.

Bernstein's pragmatic point was two-fold. First, gain as much clarity as possible about philosophical ideas of lasting import, and do this through active discussion in the classroom, a suitable testing ground for the validity of such ideas. Suitable but not unique: the Greek agora and the Roman forum provided other auspicious scenes of intense philosophical debate as did open discussion during the Occupy movement in New York City. Then, leave it to individuals who have been thus "enlightened" to carry into concrete action the ideas they have come to express in open dialogue. Enlightenment here signifies nothing rationalistic or systematic but becoming more acutely aware of the consequences of an issue or problem: aware of the purport of the ideas under discussion but not necessarily driven to undertake specific direct actions. Such actions, if and when they do occur, will have benefited from the discursive clarification of dialogue. Even if not sine qua non for attaining these actions, such clarification is a highly effective prelude and a source of continuing insight.

Dick Bernstein knew all this, and he therefore also knew that getting people to talk out ideas that otherwise remain abstract entities on the printed page was an essential first step in the gaining of practical wisdom. As he put it late in his career, "I have sought to articulate and defend the practical consequences of philosophical reflection, and the necessity of reflection for intelligent practice and action."⁶ Such reflection, he hastened to add, occurs as "an open-ended conversation with many loose ends and tangents."⁷ This statement, published more than sixty years after I took the sophomore seminar with a young Dick Bernstein, could well describe what happened in that seminar, week after week for an entire year. We were slowly but surely gaining voice. Despite the "loose ends and tangents" – or rather *through* them as integral to its force and power—it was a unique classroom experience that I shall

⁵ King's lecture, "The Future of Integration," was delivered on January 14, 1959, and reprinted in *Crises in Modern America*, Ed. H. John Heinz III (New Haven: Dwight Hall, 1959) 5 - 14. King was awarded an honorary degree from Yale in 1964.

⁶ Richard J. Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

never forget. Nor shall I ever forget the person who gave us the gift of voice, his and ours together, in that same seminar: Richard J. Bernstein.

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