

wants, so that the child can, by manipulating the model, put himself outside of himself. Most parents don't discuss the desirability of doing this, developing knowledge that enables the child to exercise control. Now I don't mean control as directive, as in driving a car; I mean to interact in useful and appropriate ways, which is what control is. But whenever the notion is brought up, control is represented as hierarchical and manipulative—

Bob It need not only be that.

Oliver Exactly. What I mean by control is sort of appropriate interactions for the common or separate purposes and to give that notion some substance you have to have models. You and I have common backgrounds and common interests, so my model of you doesn't have to be modified very much as I get to know you better. I understand the kinds of things you value. We can't talk about that to most kids, so how do we help them do it? If it's done at all, the kid does it by guess and by god and not very well. And some kids do relate well, by their own innate pressures, but I would like to see them as able to talk about that.

Modeling people's goals depends on recognizing feelings in others. Since we don't talk about it, we certainly can't measure it. And yet I think we all feel that it provides a class of capabilities which ought to be constructive and helpful and appropriate for people. This is a side of education which is hardly discussed at all. One wants one's children to have models of people which work—and also the metamodel to show how much people can differ from stereotypes. Fundamentally, what's hard about all this is we have no good way of talking about it.

Bob Well, it would be clearly of value for children to be able to recognize the appropriateness of a sort of co-recursion of invocation as a model of cooperative communication versus hierarchical invocation—to be able to distinguish between the times they're interacting with shared initiatives and when they're being very directly manipulated by somebody.

Oliver Exactly so in a technical sense, but do you know any children who would understand what you've just said? To be able to recognize feelings in others would be the direct, human way of developing the familiarity that might permit, ultimately, a more sophisticated expression and understanding of human interactions.

### SOCIETY'S PROBLEMS

Bob Suppose developing that were a specific item on your agenda for change, how would you move if you were in a position to have

influence, perhaps as a newly appointed Secretary of Education? How would you relate ideas such as we have been discussing to the enormous problems facing public education today?

Oliver First of all, for the vision I have and how to get there, one has to start the transition at the Schools of Education. All that a Secretary of Education can do is to throw money in the right way at them. No amount of jawboning helps our young friends. Morality is not developed by harangue. A Secretary of Education has to think about getting some kind of decent level of long-term and short-term research in education going. As for what is doable, it depends on how much resources our society is prepared to put into the cities. Probably not very much. "Kids sleeping on the streets? Big deal." But does the mayor have a plan about what to do? No. And if you were living in the inner city, you wouldn't send your kids to school there. You wouldn't even live in the city.

Bob The problems are getting worse, too.

Oliver But there too, research is needed. There are a great deal of unknowns about what happens to people in the long run. For example, most heroin addicts in their middle-30s quit using heroin spontaneously by the time they are 45. This is true, though little known. But why? We don't know. So in some sense, all you've got to do is keep the heroin addict alive until he's 40 and he'll quit. Spontaneously.

Bob We can't wait for cocaine to go away or assault rifles or drive-by shootings. And the new administration has an "education president."

Oliver Bush may have a heart, but he's broke. So I say that's not an education problem.

Bob How so?

## EDUCATION PROBLEMS AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Oliver It's a bigger structural problem about our society. We can't fix all these things . . .

Bob Even if we give Education the Pentagon's budget?

Oliver I don't think it would make any difference at all. The educational system is perfectly capable of wasting money as easily as the Pentagon. Probably more so.

- Bob When you have places like Chicago where they have 50 percent drop-out rate—
- Oliver You didn't say that I was supervisor of the Chicago schools. The Secretary of Education can't do anything about those problems except support research in education. If I'm supervisor of Chicago schools, then the question is what kind of authority and power do I have? And *then* how do I begin to change an inert system. But that's not an education problem, is it?
- Bob The milieu seems to be one of the fundamental education problems.
- Oliver I don't think it's in education. I mean, supposing people are becoming sick with anthrax, and then going to school. Is that an education problem, because the kids are dying in the classroom? No. It may be an educator's problem because the instructor is trying to teach and the kids are dying. But it's not an education problem. It's a problem which educators have in their environment. That doesn't mean that they're the ones to fix it. You can't fix the milieu by better teaching. Any change may be something that has to be implemented by educators, but that doesn't make it education. It's a social problem with some big, with some very big dimensions indeed. The inner city is a social problem of enormous dimensions. It can't be solved by the schools.
- Bob But teachers are taking the rap for the failure of the students to learn what society needs to have them know. I have a cousin who teaches in an inner-city school. She's a bright and energetic woman in her early 40s, who is both appalled and amazed at what she sees in the schools. Her school was performing so badly that its state charter was taken away and it's under direct supervision by the state government. The administration is hoping to escape this direction by having the students perform well on standardized tests. My cousin sees just how meaningless the tests are. Not merely do teachers give students answers to questions, the teachers' give the test repeatedly in the hopes that eventually the students will remember the answers they have been told. And because she's a white woman in a black and hispanic school, if she's at all critical, there are allegations of her being a racist. Tough situation. And the problems will get worse over the next decades because of some newly recognized social changes. Many of the inner-city schools are predominantly black in their student population. Some news recently came out of Michigan. If you count the black people going into education and receiving the credentials and the qualifications of advanced degrees, the number is vanishingly small. By opening up opportunities to blacks in other areas, our society is draining the educational community of young, talented, energetic

black people. Throughout the entire state of Michigan, a recent survey counting people under 28 with advanced degrees found only 11 young men—in education, that is.

## LOCAL HEROES

Bob And what does this mean? How are these kids going to be inspired if they do not have familiar role models, if they have no local heroes. The black kids and adolescent males won't see young black men who take ideas seriously and who can inspire them academically. And what about new teachers? My cousin is a housewife returning to teaching after raising three kids, a pretty savvy and well-balanced person. She's 40 and having a tough time in her situation. What happens if you send midwest farm girls up to Detroit? How are they going to be able to cope with a situation that tough?

Oliver It's not an education problem, and I wish it were. Those problems are among the hardest we have—Problems about how to restructure our society. But we'd better think about improving education without restructuring society. If we must restructure society to improve education, we should give up, because we cannot restructure society in any easy or simple way. That's something else.

## ALTERNATIVES

Bob What do we do? Buy guns? Build prisons? There has to be a more human alternative because America cannot accept that option.

Oliver Nonetheless, an essential aim for the education system must not be to permit itself to be held responsible for tasks clearly beyond its capacity. One research task we might propose for experienced people in schools of education is the reasonable definition of what they know they can do, what they might do with enhanced support, and what objectives are clearly beyond their control.

Bob You won't get that from an RFP. The grant-making process is one that leads all too naturally to hyperbole and misrepresentation.

Oliver But educators need to realize the considerable danger of being given resources to do an impossible job. The ultimate failure will lead to a deepening contempt and distrust by society at large of education and its effectiveness. That will be an excuse to devalue it further. I'm not

very hopeful, in fact. I think of Yeats, "Things fall apart . . . the center cannot hold . . ."

Bob: "The best lack all conviction. The worst are full of a passionate intensity . . ." But is the situation as desperate as that of armed rebellion—which was Yeats's context? Perhaps in a few places, and I hope not more generally. I see our social situation as very difficult, but one whose essence is captured best in a mini-theory of cycles in the economy, put forward by Ray Dalio (1989). He argues for a social cycle of growth and decay based on the shifting balances of international trade and domestic perceptions of individual wealth over periods as long as a generation. In sum, he explains by example that in the Depression and World War II, America was poor and Americans believed they were poor. In the 1950s, they remembered the poverty and thought themselves still poor, whereas they had become rich. In the 1960s, the U.S. was rich and society knew it, trying to simultaneously send men to the moon, fight a war in Asia, and advance equality of opportunity in the Great Society. Since then we have become poor, but still believe, act, and behave as if we were rich.

This is not a problem that can be fixed by improving education, but it might be helped if more people understood more about economics and the disastrous explosion of public debt in our country within the 1980s. I believe the nation is in for some very tough times, financially, and we face as well significant problems brought on by technology of the popular culture. Despite heroic attempts to bring good programming to TV and to humanize computing, a reasonable judgment would be that the electronic revolution has stupefied more people in number than those it has edified—

Oliver: Is that result a needs-be-so or a just-so-happened?

Bob: I hope the latter but am not convinced of it. It's not clear why changes have occurred, but the results are clear: Respect for the publicly espoused morality has broken down so much that for a large minority of the population, one not of race, but one of culture, education seems ineffective, a waste of time, not worthwhile. Everyone is entitled to "the good life." Work doesn't pay. Crime pays. Salesmanship pays. Media personality pays. Labor is for dummies.

Oliver: If you're arguing we need some sort of moral revival, I'm sure you must have something secular in mind.

Bob: I see the amassing of public debt in this past decade as so profound a failure of public policy that I think of America as gorging itself on its own children, and for what?

- Oliver Our children will pay for our folly, perhaps even to the seventh generation. But we can't get too distraught about the decline of the West. It's a mistake to assume responsibility for the entire world, especially for that much of it that lies beyond your specific control. Besides, it's debilitating, keeps you from being effective at what you actually can do. Remember what Dorothy says at the end of the Wizard of Oz, if you can't find what you're looking for in your own backyard, you probably won't find it anywhere. You have to ask what you can do that will be satisfying and useful.

## OPENING DOORS

- Bob What do you think the role of the teacher should be? Or of someone designing materials for education?
- Oliver What the teacher, the parent, does—my vision of education is a door opening. I want to open doors to the things I'm interested in and things that other people do and so on, open doors for children and show them the gardens, the glories, the infinities, that lie beyond. Which means I have to be able to invite them to go through to a place I know. In some sense, the very young children have to be carried, but as soon as they can walk they can walk through themselves. To be Wordsworthian about it, the child is carrying intimations of immortality . . .
- Bob . . . trailing clouds of glory . . .
- Oliver Quite so. The child has its curiosity not yet repressed, but it's ill formed and not under control. What you have to show is that a controlled curiosity can find things out and discover new doors that lead to other doors.
- Bob Doesn't the focus on the individual require that we have better models of minds?

## STUDYING PEOPLE

- Oliver Individual differences and the complexities of relations between people should not be reduced to the level of *Reader's Digest* synopses. Whether one wants to make a science of it or not I don't know, but I would think that, at some point in my visionary educational system, the understanding and communication would be far more advanced than it is today in the best of our societies—just because it would allow

people to deal more easily with other people. With a more complex appreciation of individual differences, it would then perhaps be easier for people to accept different kinds of motives and capabilities. My friend understands that I am interested in numbers and such, going back to the diagonal proof, but she doesn't understand why it's interesting at all. But because I have my own specialties, and because I worry about how special they are, I can get a better feeling for how somebody might be interested in certain problems in art, about which I couldn't care less, or, to take a preposterous example, how someone could believe that basketball is the beginning and the end of the world. I don't empathize with that, or even sympathize. But yes, I can see that some people get swept away by the dash of it, as one might with a Jackson Pollock painting. Seeing how there can be differences enables tolerance. One has to understand how different people are before one can develop any deep-seated tolerance.

## LITERATURE AS CHARACTERIZATION

Bob You have written books for children. Isn't it the case that literature is primarily the characterization of people and their relations through stories?

Oliver Yes, but the descriptions have been through such a filter that the kids have a very hard time taking such characterizations seriously. And of course we tend to oversimplify lots of tales, but this is not a subject in schools. I have a more technical intention in developing models of people, but before one can actually make and reason with models, kids have to learn to put words to and recognize a far greater class of personal interactions. We adults don't have good words for that very much either. Although kids can say easily, "You're putting me down," kids almost never say about two other people, "He's putting him down." Yet what that kind of practice exhibits is a kind of sensitivity which ought to be more accessible, because it makes it easier to say appropriate things about relationships. Kids may think such things, but they don't say them. Nor do we adults discuss them in any articulate way. I want to make the discussion possible and easy so that we can talk about the truth. Such capabilities are part of those meta-level skills that permit a life-long and self-sustaining life of the mind.

Bob Others might be?

Oliver Learning how to learn. Learning how to judge oneself usefully—in order to be able to become better. Developing a vision that will help wise choices on how to use one's capabilities. But for these lofty goals,

everyday knowledge must prove useful in the lives of students. Learning must be valuable enough in their experience that they will learn as well to trust and respect the system of education. For that they need clear examples of good people doing their best to make a difference in human lives—local heroes as you have named them.

Bob We've come up again to the clouds. Since I share your vision on these points I won't call it cloud-cuckoo-land. What should we do? What actions might be worthwhile and make a difference?

### WHAT TO DO?

Oliver Familiarity does not have to come from boring exercises. We need epistemologically oriented inventors of games—

Bob That's a job I've been trying to create for myself for years. Not easy.

Oliver It should be easy.

Oliver What single thing do you think is most important.

Oliver Reading.

Bob Well, so the child does that at three, five, six to—nine, whatever.

Oliver It's not whatever. It's forever. There's a door opener for you. There are other higher-level things too, like curiosity, like being able to challenge authority.

Bob I urge my kids to question authority, my own included—but don't teachers already have major problems in this area. They get no respect, have no authority of any importance.

Oliver Our role is to do best what we can, with respect to those parts of education we have some control over. We need to distinguish between those problems that can be solved or those processes that can be controlled and improved and all the others in the morass that confronts us. There isn't much that can be done in the short term. The really long vision requires improving schools of education.

Bob How?

Oliver By doing real research.