

PATHS FOR RECIPROCIITY

International Committee EdU

1. “TO BE THE FIRST TO LOVE” AS AN EDUCATOR

In the first part of our reflection on the “the art of loving and education,” we underscored that to put ourselves in the perspective of love means, in a certain sense, to step out of the traditionally understood notion of what a relationship is, and to highlight the person who is an educator, his/her actions, rather than just his/her philosophy. It is not just a matter of teaching, but also to put love “at the basis” of educational activity.

This involves a *priority of values* that regards the nature and quality of the relationship, that decidedly brings us to the heart of the *anthropological question* itself,¹ of loving and being loved. In fact, what could move a person to be interested in another person, if not the fact that he/she “wants the good” of the other? This is the plane on which education finds its most intimate calling, which by nature is generative.² An educator, therefore, is the one who knows how to be the first to love, and also knows how to give with no strings attached, beyond natural expectations, also because in the educational field outcomes are not at all taken for granted.

But it is this very risk that makes of education the most courageous and longsighted investment in the long-run, capable of seeing a young person with new eyes, *in the reality of his/her “being,” but also in the perspective of his/her “potential being.”* This is a pedagogical model on which also all of Christian theology is founded: The Love of a God, Father of all, who first of all³ took the initiative and loved us - as Chiara Lubich underscores - “when we were everything else but loveable.”⁴

But are there also the “less lovable” in education?

Above all, the disadvantaged, the less capable, or those who are less willing to listen and make an effort in their studies. It is interesting to note, in this regard, how some of the most fruitful *educational approaches* of the 1800s and the 1900s were born precisely in paying more attention to the most difficult students. They are not great utopias, but original contributions by educators who did not stop in the face of trials and failures, and who knew how to cultivate that “complete amnesty of heart,”⁵ first of all within themselves, which makes it possible to see students as new each day, in order to make them be fully themselves (to bring out the best in them).

In the educational and school sphere, we know how difficult it is to have this amnesty and how the expectations of teachers play such a determinative role in regards to students. For example, it has been observed that when we are not able to have an always new vision of them, at times we run that risk of being unjust, conditioned by the outcomes of previous exams, by prejudices and stereotypes even when it comes to our own children or students. Thus reveal the studies done on the *Pygmalion effect*,⁶ all in the framework of research on “self-fulfilling prophecies”: if a teacher is convinced that one of his students is especially gifted (or, on the contrary, is not very gifted), he/she will be treated, even though unconsciously, according to this preconceived scheme. The result is that the judgement/behaviour of the teacher will end up influencing the behaviour of the child, who in the long-run will tend to conform to the idea, be it positive or negative, that the adult has transmitted about him/her.

¹ G.M.Zanghì, *La notte della cultura europea*, Città Nuova, Rome 2007.

² When all is said and done, “to be loved means to hear someone say: *You must not die*,” as Gabriel Marcel acutely states (*Il mistero dell'essere*, Borla, Turin 1971, 2 vol., II, pp. 131-32).

³ Cfr. C. Lubich, *L'arte di amare* (English version: *The Art of Loving*), Città Nuova, Rome 2005, p. 23-24

⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 51. The very Amos Comenio elaborated an educational style based on fraternity, in the awareness of the presence of a God who is Father of all.

⁵ C. Lubich., *La vita un viaggio* (English version: *On the Holy Journey*), Città Nuova, Rome, 1994, p. 16.

⁶ R.Rosenthal, L. Jacobson, *Pigmalione in classe*, Angeli, Milan 1974.

As educators, then, we can balance these distortions of assessment by first of all being ready to *understand* the person in their entirety, by making him/her feel “capable” and worthy of our trust. This requires a continuous inner transformation within the educator, master of that sublime art of *knowing how to begin again*, able to recognize limits, but above all, the qualities and potential of youth. It requires a proactive will, a readiness to first of all give of oneself.

As many research studies show on *the contagious value of the gift*,⁷ the effect of this generative thrust of educators is that, sooner or later, it provokes a response of reciprocity from the student, who will feel free to respond to the educator’s trust, perhaps by making a real effort in his/her studies.⁸ From an educational point of view, therefore, to love has its own intrinsic, natural correlation with reciprocity, even if this does not come automatically, nor should it be expected. Thus, our “loving,” as Maurice Nedoncelle underscores, is substantially an educative act,⁹ in as much as it constantly seeks to render the other, in turn, “loved.”¹⁰

2. THE “AS OURSELVES”

We can thus sustain that education has always been the largest, life-changing *investment of hope*, from which also derives the most demanding question that a responsible educator should often ask themselves: “Where do I get the courage to educate, to instil confidence, support and encourage others?” It is a question that, from an ethical and anthropological point of view, finds its answer in that golden rule present in almost all faiths and cultures: “Love your enemy as yourself,”¹¹ a measure by which we can also measure our behaviour towards others. In fact, as the author of Ecclesiastes (14:5) provokingly asks us “He who is evil against himself, with whom will he be good?”: a question that is taken up again by K.G. Jung,¹² who invites us to discover in ourselves “the least of our brothers,” the “real enemy to love.”

To know and love oneself and awareness, responsibility and love for others are inseparable. In fact, as Romano Guardini acutely notes, this is perhaps the most decisive step in education, which always begins from the very life of the educator, because it is precisely the fact that I struggle to improve myself that gives credibility to my “*pedagogical efforts for others*”¹³: “(why) do I personally reach out and struggle to grow.”¹⁴

In this inner view, the self feels the importance of *stepping into the other person*, like a game at the mirror, in which one can lose oneself but also rediscover oneself. “Who am I?”, “Who am I as an educator?”, “What do I want to be?”. It involves a deep process of self-awareness, of interpersonal dialogue, that has as its reference point *the Being of the educator*, in his capacity as the first beneficiary of education itself. It is a reflection that goes to the heart of our needs, of those most authentic ones that are connected to our fundamental yearnings, to the very fears and hopes of all human beings, and even more so to those of young people¹⁵: the need to belong, to be accepted and trusted, for attention, empathy and deep understanding, and at once, for distinction, initiative and participation, for authenticity, harmonious congruence between oneself and the world, and others.

The cure, therefore, becomes educational in the measure that the educator is firstly able to be in touch with his/her true self, a substantial and concrete recall to seek our real identity, the existential condition also for an authentic educative relationship.

3. THE LOGIC OF “MAKING OURSELVES ONE”

This all involves a circular process in which educators live the remedy as an act of deep participation in the needs of one’s Self and, at once, in those of the youth, seen as equals, worthy of the attention and care that the educator, as a person, would want to also receive.

From a more general point of view, Chiara Lubich defined the “making ourselves one” as the process of entering as deep as possible into the soul of other person: to really understand their problems, their needs; to fully *take on their*

⁷ Cfr. R. Roche, *L’intelligenza prosociale*, Erickson, Trent 2006.

⁸ Oftentimes, a student loves a certain subject because he/she admires and trusts in his/her teacher.

⁹ M.Nedoncelle, *La réciprocité des consciences*, Aubier Montaigne, Paris 1948, p. 84. Even C. Marx affirms: “If you love without arousing love..., if through the example of life of people who love, you do not become a loving person, then your love is powerless ...” (cit. in E. Fromm, *L’arte di amare – English Version: The Art of Loving*, Mondadori, Milan 1986, p. 36)

¹⁰ As Saint Anselmo d’Aosta often highlighted, the distinctive mark of real education is the climate of joy and hope that is established among those who love each other (Eadmero of Canterbury, *Vita di S. Anselmo*, Jaca book, Milan 1987).

¹¹ Mt. 7:12

¹² K.G. Jung, *Psychologie und Erziehung*, Rascher, Zürich 1946.

¹³ R. Guardini, *Persona e libertà. Saggi di fondazione della teoria pedagogica*, La Scuola, Brescia 2000, p. 222. On the relationship between self-understanding and understanding others, cfr. L. Pareyson, *Esistenza e persona*, Turin 1985, pp.205 and ss.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p.222. E. Fromm, to this regard, he states: “Egoists are incapable of loving others, but they are also incapable of loving themselves” (*L’arte di amare*, op. cit., p. 69).

¹⁵ Cfr. H.A. Maslow, *Motivazione e personalità*, Armando, Rome 1990. As P. Ricoeur underscores, the ego is reconcilable because of this alterity with respect to oneself (*Il sé come altro*, Jaca Book, Milan 1993).

burdens, to make their needs one's own, such as their pains, “without any impatience,” “empty of self,” “*hoping for the others that goodness, justice and truth win out.*”¹⁶

But what happens if we act in this way?

People can feel that we have taken on what oppresses them, and they feel free, therefore more willing to accept that message that we wish to share with them.¹⁷

In this perspective, to educate means to know how to enter in the minds and hearts of those who are being educated. In this sense, educative love is first of all *to take care*, expressed as an active interest in their lives and their healthy growth. It is not a casual attention, but an intentional logic of *encounter and dialogue* with their most authentic humanity. This is because each human being needs to have their meaning recognized, their place in the world, in the heart of someone else. As Ernesto Olivero¹⁸ often exhorts in his meetings with youth: “If you speak, and I listen to you, you change me.” Even he who hears and knows how to listen with profound attention and empathy is in turn enriched, profoundly transformed, if none other than by that constant effort, not so much to be before the other, but *to be* with all of his/herself *within the situation* and the context of the communication.

In fact, as sustains the philosopher Martin Buber, “a society can be called human in the measure that its members confirm each other,”¹⁹ by putting our expectations aside, making space first of all for the *ethical understanding* of the other,²⁰ as Emmanuel Lévinas defines it, which is such according to how our attention is able to safeguard his/her transcendence. Only in this way can the other person find the time and the way to reveal him/herself in their original identity.

This involves an educative relationship that knows how to give a glance that “surrounds one with delicacy,”²¹ as Martin Heidegger defines it, that renounces any invasive gestures of imposition and indoctrination in order to make an emptiness in oneself, in order to create that *welcoming space*, which by nature is educative; that is, it allows, as its etymology states, to “e-duce,” to draw out. This operation is only possible if the student is able to reveal himself, to trust, to question and to question himself, thus giving expression to his full potential. It is not a mere option of tolerance, but the influential background that encourages dialogue, questions and ideas, but also constructive criticism and necessary corrections, beyond easy forms of permissiveness. It involves a spirit of patient waiting and the integral announcement of the truth.

It is a matter of an effect that grows deeper in the measure that the educator is aware of the importance of *personalizing* his teaching, through which the “centrality of the individual and, at once, the ethical understanding of the human being and society” come to the fore. From a more general perspective, therefore, the question of *personalizing* “is above all a moral push, that urges us to double our efforts to offer our services more effectively to those who need them.”²²

This attitude towards others and this way of relating, therefore, translate into a renewal of the very “calling” of an educator, whose “mission” is to give a high quality service to people, increasingly efficacious, as the educator is always more convinced “that the constructive effort has to come from positive forces and active energies within the student.”²³ This relationship, so understood, gives life to a *process of “mutual help”* whose end is not to substitute the other, but to develop a gradual “personal competency,” confidence in one's ability to overcome the challenges by oneself, and ability to responsibly face always new situations.

By making our own a phrase of Father Milani: “Education must teach us only one thing: that young people are all different and the each moment lived by the same youth is different.”²⁴ If this is true, then the educator must love in every present moment, in the manner that the concrete circumstances dictate: encouraging, admonishing, urging, reproaching, but always out of love. As Saint Augustine reminds us: “We can only enter into the Truth through Love.”²⁵ It is on this plane that our passion as educators is born and nourished, our true art that knows how to wed scientific competences and teaching techniques with the capacity to love, which is generative par excellence because it is able to have that creative gaze, always new, that knows how *to draw out, edify and sustain*, awakening our thirst and courage to seek the real-good.

¹⁶ Cfr. C. Lubich, *L'arte di amare*, Città Nuova, Rome 2005, pp. 69-90.

¹⁷ To this regard, we recall the pages of Carl Rogers on *empathy* and on student-centred teaching. “If the creation of a climate of acceptance, understanding and respect is the most effective base to facilitate that form of learning that is called therapy, could it not be the creation of that climate also for the base of that form of learning that is called INSTRUCTION?” (cfr. *Terapia centrata sul cliente*, La Nuova Italia, Florence 1997, p. 217).

¹⁸ E. Oliviero, *Non bussate è già aperto*, Mondadori, Milan 1997.

¹⁹ M. Buber, *Il principio dialogico e altri scritti*, S. Paolo, Milan 1993.

²⁰ E. Lévinas *La traccia dell'altro*, Pironti, Naples 1986, p. XVI.

²¹ M. Heidegger, *Seminari*, Adelphi, Milan 1992, p. 179.

²² D. Hopkins, “Introduzione”, in OCSE-CERI, *Personalizzare l'insegnamento*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2008, p. 29.

²³ *Ibidem*

²⁴ L. Milani, *Lettera a una professoressa*, Editrice Fiorentina, 1996.

²⁵ Agostino d'Ippona, *Contro Fausto Manicheo*, 32,18