

Autotelic Education: A Concept

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In this writing I discuss a form of education that doesn't manage students' lives and dictate what they should study and think and become. It is an educational process that doesn't center on government and bureaucracies and schools and curriculum and teachers. It doesn't focus on groups, categories, collectivities—gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, grade in school, any of that. This form of education is about individual students—imagine their faces—who, for whatever reason, are committed to living a great life and are willing to study with all they have in them what it takes to achieve that. I speak to how these students might be supported by schools in this life-long undertaking (those who live great lives don't turn their minds off at eighteen or twenty-two or twenty-four or thirty).

The pursuit of greatness involves the intention to live an exemplary and true life. An intention is more than a goal, more than a hope; I *will* make this happen. Those with this intention seek to experience and manifest the finest, the best, the very highest quality, in every dimension of their existence: In physical health and bodily perfection and grace (I think of the closest possible approximation of a Greek statue or a great dancer). In self-understanding. In self-value and self-importance. In character: morality, ethics, courage, autonomy, integrity, responsibility, willfulness, dedication, persistence. In relationships—parents, siblings, friends, mates, children, racial and ethnic and religious kinsmen, humankind, animals and nature. In love and sexual expression. In art and literature and historical understanding. In grooming, fashion, and surroundings—home architecture and furnishings, work place decor. In work. For these individuals the various aspects of their being and lives reflect and give expression to their uniqueness, their singularity, at ever-increasing levels of development. And all that they do and become occurs within the context of a deeply felt awareness of their mortality--death will come and eternity will begin, and all one has is the time between now and then.

I assume the numbers of students who view their lives in this way are few. But they do exist, and they deserve an education that

suits them. I look for a label for this kind of education so that it can be analyzed, assessed, worked on, and tested out. In the field of education there are the terms self-directed learning, self-designed learning, and independent study, and there are honors courses and tracks and home-schooling, and there is the concept of an autodidact. But none of these labels work for me because I can imagine all them serving pedestrian and personally inappropriate ends and means. I want a concept that sets the bar extremely high.

In his book *Flow: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness* (Rider and Company, 2002), Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi discusses a way of engaging the world he calls *autotelic*. Autotelic refers to self-generated (auto) ends (telos). Autotelic purposes and actions, Csikszentmihalyi notes, emerge from within the individual person rather than from external influences. The autotelic concept—autotelic learning, autotelic teaching, autotelic education—gets at it for me and it is obscure enough that I can apply particular meanings to it and separate it out from other forms of student-initiated goals and actions. For example, it allows me to distinguish true freedom and autonomy from the pseudo-versions of same prevalent in contemporary schooling practice. And it helps me get at the notion of all-out, with-all-of-myself efforts toward personal transformation and exceptionality, quality of experience, and maximal positive impact on one's personal and public worlds. I will be twisting Csikszentmihalyi's concept to suit my purposes in this writing. For instance, Csikszentmihalyi emphasizes doing something for its own reward and not being focused on the results it will achieve. While I am all for doing something because of the immediate experience it will bring, I also want to emphasize doing things for what will result in the future, including the long-distant future. So if you want a "pure" consideration of Csikszentmihalyi's ideas, you are advised to read his book.

The basic ideas I work with in this piece have been with me for some time—to illustrate that, see the essay "Authentic Teaching" in my book *While There is Time* listed on the home page of this site. It was a biography I just finished reading, however, that helped me coalesce and expand them and prompted this writing. The biography is *Le Corbusier: A Life* by Nicholas Fox Weber (Knopf, 2008). Le Corbusier (1887-1965), Swiss born and French bred, was one of the premiere architects of the twentieth century. He was also

a superb painter and furniture designer. As closely as anyone I've ever known or read about, Le Corbusier embodied the ideals I refer to here. Reading the Weber book would provide a good background for understanding this writing as well as a foundation for taking it further.

From a very early age, certainly by his early teens, Le Corbusier sought with all his being to experience the very finest the world has to offer, and to become the best possible version of himself and manifest that in both the personal and public realms of his life—and he continued this quest throughout his seventy-eight years of life. Central to this discussion, Le Corbusier didn't wait around for governments and schools and teachers to make the kind of life he envisioned happen. His standards for himself were higher than any school's. He refused to give his mind and body over to teachers; he would become his own person, a free person. He parted ways with formal schooling very early on in his life. He took responsibility for shaping himself and his life. He sought out the highest caliber literature and art and people. He traveled widely. He cultivated his body and enhanced his taste and personal style. He sought out excitement, and took risks, and went against the grain, and toughened himself so that he would be able to stand up to the discouragements and punishments, large and small, dispensed to those who break away from the mass and its conventions and contradict those in power. He became a world-renown architect without ever having being certified as an architect.

I'll quote from the Weber biography and offer comments in order to communicate a sense of Le Corbusier and, more fundamentally, to flesh out the autotelic education concept.

Le Corbusier:

You must forge your own weapons for the life you want to have. You must make yourself a superior being, to see only what is high. And detach yourself, turn away from everything not involved in the realization of something superior.

Superior isn't in the vocabulary of those who control our schools.

Le Corbusier:

It is in the interior that the essential occurs.

Greatness is ultimately an inner journey and subjective experience.

Le Corbusier:

I have worked for what mankind needs most today: silence and peace.

Such grandiose aims. Our schools at every level are more about getting the paper done by Tuesday.

Le Corbusier:

How nice it would be to die swimming toward the sun.

If life is lived honorably and fully, death will be OK.

Critic Graham Bell about the painter Cézanne:

But these . . . qualities (of “varied and inimitable” color and his handling) do not account for the look of hard and unrelenting authenticity that distinguishes his work from that of lesser men. It is Cézanne’s peculiar determination to pin down his sensation, and the exactness and intensity of notation resulting from this, that made Cézanne pre-eminent. . . . In a Cézanne there can be no question of juggling with the elements of design, no possibility of glossing over difficulties, no equivocation. With Cézanne integrity was the thing, and integrity never allowed him to become fixed at any one point in his development, but sent him onward toward new discoveries, new realizations of the motive.

Poet Wallace Stevens on the Graham quote:

I note the above both for itself and because it adds to subject and manner the thing that is incessantly overlooked: the artist, the presence of the determining personality. Without that reality no amount of other things matters much.

Review the educational discourse of our time. With reference to students, see how often you see the following words: authenticity,

determination, exactness, intensity, integrity, determining personality.

From *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald:

If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life . . . it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness . . .

Gorgeous? Sensitivity to the promises of life? Gift for hope? Romantic readiness? In today's schools and colleges?

Tennessee Williams' paraphrase of Le Corbusier:

I need the introduction of the heart. I need to see and to feel some blood. I need to rub against some warm flesh. In the name of God, touch my heart. At that point it becomes art.

Heart? Blood? Warm flesh? Touch my heart? Art? In school, at any level?

Le Corbusier:

Let a good life flow gently past, whatever follies it commits, whatever pleasures it chooses.

Where, in any school, are we taught to flow rather than lurch along?

Le Corbusier:

We do not work to be praised, we work out of duty to our conscience, which is within every man and which is there to tell him whether he is behaving well or badly.

How do we learn the importance of conscience and to be guided by it?

Philip Roth in his book *The Human Stain*:

What do crows think when they hear the other birds singing? They think it's stupid. It is. Cawing. That's the only thing. It doesn't look good for a bird that struts to sing a sweet little song. No, caw your head off.

Today's schools do their best to condition crows to sing sweet little songs.

Le Corbusier, quoting French writer Henri-Marie Stendhal:

In America, in the Republic, one must waste a whole day in paying serious court to the shopkeepers in the streets, and must become as stupid as they are; and over there, no opera.

If "shopkeepers" and "opera" are taken as metaphors, American life, including its media and schools, is in the hands of shopkeepers, not great men and women, and pop music rules the day.

How can autotelic education, autotelic learning, the process exemplified in Le Corbusier's life, happen in a school context? I'll offer some remarks:

Formal schooling and the self-transforming, personally empowering individual pursuits I describe here may well be antithetical. I've been in education for many years, at both the secondary and university levels, and I've never seen it go on, including at the doctoral level. Nevertheless, I would like to think that schools could provide encouragement and opportunity and support for serious students of the kind I refer to in this writing. Along the way, Le Corbusier had mentors that supported his development. He knew what he was trying to accomplish and he knew what sort of people could help him, and he knew how to find them. These mentors not only could point the way forward to LeCorbusier, they *were* the way forward: their lives embodied the measure of greatness that Le Corbusier was seeking in his own life. Le Corbusier wasn't trying to emulate these mentors; they were who they were and he wanted to be who he was. And these mentors encouraged and supported him in that direction; they didn't try to shape Le Corbusier into junior versions of themselves. These mentor relationships were informal and they were tenuous: when they no longer enriched the lives of both the mentor and Le Corbusier, they were discontinued.

Perhaps something of this sort could occur in a school setting. The autotelic ideal could be put before students, and for those among them willing to make the commitment to this rigorous process of self-determination and personal enhancement there could be support in finding a mentor or mentors. My guess is that more often than not the mentor(s) will be from outside the school--it has not been my experience that exemplary, great, people are on school and university faculties in significant numbers, though there are some. Perhaps mentors could be compensated monetarily, but perhaps in many if not most cases that will not be necessary. It could be that exemplary people find it rewarding to mentor dedicated, for-real students, and that the relationship and its outcomes will be payment enough for them. No one has ever asked me, and I'm not sure I'm worthy of being an autotelic mentor, but I would be one free of charge if it were a truly autotelic student. What I would require, however, is that at any time the student or I could discontinue our connection. I don't want a student to have to be with me, and I don't want to have to be with a student. I've had more than enough of that in my long career in education.

Another possible element of autotelic education that comes to mind is a group comprised of autotelic learners and led by one of the mentors, or rotating mentors, that would meet from time to time—once a month?—to share ideas and give support and advice to its participants. Here again, voluntary and tenuous: the individual can leave anytime, and the group or its leader(s) can tell someone to leave any time.

If autotelic learning were part of a school, how would someone complete the program or graduate? Perhaps a review committee made up of, say, three adults whose lives in their entirety reflect greatness to pass on an autotelic student's candidacy. I assume many if not all of the committee members would be non-educators. They will have had no previous contact with the candidate, and I perceive no need for them to be in similar interest areas as the candidate—I trust great people to perceive greatness even when it is not within their domain of concern. The review committee would be asked to make a judgment: with reference to the highest standard of engagement and accomplishment, is this candidate worthy of our endorsement: yes, no.

Until schools get around to giving attention to the Le Corbusiers of the world, it appears that the best they can do is drop out as soon as they can or, I guess more realistically, wait it out. Do what their teachers and professors say until they are turned loose, whenever that is. And then take on the challenge of teaching themselves with whatever help they can muster to live fully and honestly and passionately and productively at the highest level they have in them. And someday die swimming into the sun.