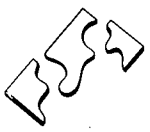

On Pedagogic Hope

In *In the Nuclear Shadow*[1] one of the children, a ten-year old, speaks of a recurring dream. A nightmare of "a big black and white cloud and then all fire." And in this hell of heat she sees shadows moving, the faces of her mother and father. What do we say to children whose nightmares are real? It is the way children experience our age.

> Sometimes it occurs to me that I might not grow up. (Anthony, age 11)
>
> It is invading our dreams. It is in our dreams. (Amy, age 15)
>
> Sometimes I feel really depressed, like there's no point in going to school, because I'm going to die soon. A lot of times, I'm really convinced that I'm going to die in a nuclear war. (Brad, age 17)
>
> Many in my class in high school don't expect to reach thirty years of age. (Jessica, age 17)

It is hard to listen to young people and not to see and hear our own failing. Because what the children can tell us is not only that we have burdened them with the living fear of ultimate horror and wasted life. But almost worse, that we have heaped on top of this a certain responsibility. A responsibility of transforming this madness into something thtat makes sense in a child's life. As one of the young people says, "It is a very big responsibility for my generation to bear." And another child

> I don't want to have all this weight on my shoulders. I want to live. I want a chance to experience things while I am young. And not to have to deal with all these things as an adult. And I can't . . . because people . . . they need escape too . . . and they are just dumping it on me . . . and the younger generation . . . it is hard. (Elizabeth, age 14)

What we are accused of passing off to children is a responsibility which is not theirs to assume. It is the responsibility which the older generation must make real in their pedagogic lives with the younger generation. It is the responsibility we have for demonstrating active hope for our children and for our world for the sake of the children.

In the shadow of "the Bomb," it is difficult maybe not to smile cynically at any positive program, to shrug fatalistically at the inevitable, to despair in the absence of solutions, or to sigh pessimistically that the worst is sure to come. But those who live with children cannot afford to be so nihilistic without forfeiting the pedagogic place they occupy in the lives of their children.

"Please give me a reason, tell me about hope," says a young woman about to give birth. The hopelessness of life in *The Day After*[2] makes the birth of newcomers absurd. Is it the body who refuses to let the child be born? Or is it the child who refuses to be born in a world without hope? We hear that in Sweden women may be refusing to have any more babies as long as the disarmament policies remain ineffective. A hopeless world has no room for children.

But it is also true that in the presence of our children we must have hope both for them and for the worthwhileness of a world in which they are to live. Indeed, it is in the living with children that new parents often

experience the sudden awareness of the importance of the continued existence of the world. Now that I am a father to this child, I can no longer turn away from the political insanities which threaten this world. I experience my children as a living with hope. In turn, I must act. This hope activates me.

Hope is there from the very beginning of the first stirring of the fetus. However mixed and confused the feelings of expectant mothers and fathers may appear, one of the earliest and deepest sensations is the experience of hope which particularizes itself in thoughts such as "I hope the child will be healthy." The woman who is expecting a child is literally inhabited by hope, said Marcel. Conversely, we might say that only those who are inhabited by hope can be with children as true mothers, true fathers, true teachers.

The experience of hope distinguishes a pedagogic life from a non-pedagogic one. It also makes clear that we can only hope for children we truly love, not in a romantic sense but in the sense of pedagogic love. What hope gives us is the simple avouchment, "I will not give up on you. I know you can make a life for yourself. I place my hope in you." Thus hope refers to that which gives us patience, tolerance, that which gives us belief in the possibilities of our children and in the world which sustains them. Hope is our experience of the child's possibilities. It is our experience of confidence that a child will show us how a life is to be lived, no matter what the odds, no matter how many disappointments we may have felt. Is this not the experience of parenting? Thus hope gives us pedagogy itself. Or is it pedagogy which grants us hope? Like all great values their ontological roots seem to merge.

Pedagogic hope animates the way a pedagogue lives with a child, and it gives meaning to the way the adult stands in the world, represents the world to the child, takes responsibility for the world and embodies or stylizes the forms of knowledge through which the world is known and explained to children.

Dasberg[3] warns of the punishment which befalls us if we fail or refuse to show how a life of pedagogic hope is to be lived. Our example may turn entire generations of young people cynical, without hope, lacking a sense of commitment or willingness to show how a life is to be lived. So we witness the spectre of Günter Grass' *The Tin Drum*: young people who refuse to grow up because we are unable to give them a reason to.

Hope is not just a passive kind of optimism that things will work out well in the end. Hope implies life commitment and work. "Please give me a reason, tell me about hope," begged the pregnant mother in the movie *The Day After*. And she continued, "Why do you work so hard in here?" It was our sadness that the doctor also was too tired and numbed. He could not tell her about the children. Even in the most absurd and painful of circumstances we cannot or must not give up on our children. And yet, when life itself has turned profoundly hopeless, then pedagogic hope may fail as well.

How ironic that only because so much can go wrong (in any life and especially in ours) that I may experience my possibilities for a child. It is

exactly the vulnerability of our children, and ultimately of our world, which makes hope a possible human experience.

As I write these words, I hear my child running in the hallway downstairs. The uncertain cadence of little feet. Running. Aimlessly exuberant. And yet, full of imminent purpose. Or is it my caring uplifting? A sudden listening. And then overcome with purpose for this child? His running compels my ears to hear hope itself. There is the undeniable presence of hope's fitful fate in this running. The rhapsodical clatter of this child's running about, never sure where he will totter.

Max van Manen

Notes

1. *In the Nuclear Shadow: What Can the Children Tell Us?* Video Impact Productions, Santa Cruz, California, 1983.
2. ABC television film *The Day After* broadcast on Sunday Night, November 20, 1983.
3. Lea Dasberg "In the Shadow of the Year 2000." See this journal, pp. 117-126.

As this issue was going to press, we learned of the death of our friend and colleague Professor James B. MacDonald. We would like to honour his memory and to express our condolences to those who were close to him. He was an eminent thinker and an inspiring teacher. His presence will be greatly missed.