THE EDUCATOR AS PROPHET
A Metaphor With A Future?

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As the College of Education of the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa began the celebration of its fiftieth anniversary, a resolution was passed by the faculty to accept in principle a guiding Academic Development Plan. Three charges to the faculty were stated in the introduction to the document. They were: (1) the production of new knowledge relative to education, especially in Hawai‘i, (2) assistance to the State of Hawai‘i Department of Education for continuing inservice training of its staff and for assisting in the evaluation of its programs and personnel, and (3) preservice preparation of teachers for public and private schools.

A “mission statement” makes it clear that the term “education” is not to be considered as synonymous with “schooling”—a process confined to schools—but, instead, denotes a broader process encompassing other aspects of life and other institutions. In addition to preparing elementary and secondary school personnel, the College is now committed to preparing educators for other formal, informal, and non-formal settings. Rather than just planning for the future, the document commits the College to planning a future that calls for the linking and interacting of educational activities in both Hawai‘i and the Pacific Basin. Emphasized throughout is a moral responsibility to improve the quality of life through improved delivery of educational services.

The statement and accompanying Academic Development Plan are more than simply an anniversary statement, but an initial response to what is increasingly seen as a growing crisis in American public education. It is a crisis whereby a series of rapid changes entail sharp conflict and tension and indicate the possibility that a system may soon be altered so that it will then be significantly different from what it has only recently been. These changes increasingly make it unlikely that, from at least the viewpoint of some of its members, the system will be able to make possible the continued satisfaction of certain values which they hold to be essential for their continued well-being and self-respect. During this period there is likely to arise a new generation whose background assumptions and theories begin to reflect the changes occurring around them and which resonate less and less congenially with those assumptions and theories of an earlier generation which are now felt to be wrong or obsolete. Such a crisis situation appears to be emerging as we rapidly move from a society characterized by growth and abundance to one characterized by “stagflation” and scarcity accompanied by an unprecedented distrust in experts of all kinds and the leadership formerly provided by social institutions.

The purpose of this article is to examine an expanded definition of education and what would appear to be a related metaphor as guides for providing direction and purpose for the College of Education of the University of Hawai‘i and its programs as it begins its next fifty years.

This academic development plan of the College of Education, and similar plans elsewhere, become good intentions in search of a guide to implementation. Such a guide is often provided by the transforming quality of a metaphor. A metaphor provides a means of both knowing and understanding; a way of proceeding from what is known to that which is unknown. It provides a “means of effecting instantaneous fusion of two separated realms of
experience into one illuminating, iconic, encapsulating image." As a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or idea is used to indicate a likeness or analogy between it and a second idea or object quite unlike it. In the process it may add to that second object or idea a dimension, previously unknown, which, in turn, may suggest a response toward that object or idea not previously considered. For example, if one believes that social institutions can become sick, then steps may be taken to restore them again to health.

Education, for educational historian Lawrence Cremin, is "the deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills or sensibilities, as well as any outcomes of that effort." Such effort is carried out "with concepts in mind of desirable outcomes in human beings . . ." It includes a series of transactions that include the individual's own efforts and the outcome of such efforts by others.

Like the Academic Development Plan statement, Cremin calls for an ecological view of education where it becomes the responsibility of a variety of community agencies, institutions, and educationally significant others and varying configurations of these interacting with each other and the total society in which they are embedded.

The content of education is then culture itself. It is a learned repertoire of behavior—and related thoughts and artifacts—exhibited by the members of a social group and acquired by them in a social setting as they transact individually and as a group with those contingencies that are part of both their physical and social environment. These repertoires are transmitted independent of genetic heredity from one generation to the next or within a given generation and are selected out because of their adaptive consequences or because of the rewards and costs arranged for some persons by other people or because of consequences that follow from the physical environment. Such content may be traditional in the sense that it is transmitted from one generation to the next or it may be situational in the sense that it is transmitted among the members of a given generation as they face a crisis or challenge in common.

Education then is a process occurring society-wide and involving nothing less than the transmission and renewal of the culture of that society. This transmission and renewal is carried out by persons Cremin calls "educationally significant others." Anthropologist George D. Spindler calls them "cultural agents." These persons perform the function of recruiting members for a social system in general and for specific statuses and roles in particular. On occasion, however, they may become agents of cultural discontinuity, the kind of discontinuity that does not reinforce the traditional values or recruit persons into the existing system . . . but instead recruits persons into a system that does not exist or is just emerging.

Having said all of this, what might then be an appropriate guiding metaphor? From our earlier definition of education it appears that such a metaphor must accommodate the possibility that educators and schools of education will concern themselves with directed, deliberate and, possibly, discontinuous change in those directions and with those consequences considered desirable and achieved with a degree of control over the outcome.

Anthropologist Anthony Wallace describes a form of social change in which a society undergoes certain fluxions that culminate in relatively sudden changes in the "Cultural Gestalt." The process by which change occurs is the "revitalization movement." Such movements are characterized by:

- deliberate, organized attempts by some members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture by rapid acceptance of a pattern of multiple innovations.

In these cases the people in a sociocultural system have become increasingly disorganized due to one or a combination of demands upon them. What begins as a period of increased individual disorganization quickly becomes one of general disorganization and stress throughout the entire society intensified by the failure of traditional need satisfaction techniques. In addition there is tension and anxiety over the prospect of having to change behavior patterns and inadequate ways for dealing with anxiety over the loss of a meaningful way of life.

What follows is a time of revitalization and here, I believe, can be found the necessary guiding metaphor. It is during this time that an individual or group of individuals achieves a revolution suggesting the construction of a utopian image of sociocultural organization. This constitutes a "goal culture" which is linked to the existing culture with a "transfer culture." The latter is a system of operations that, if faithfully followed, will convert the existing culture into the goal culture.

The cultural agents then attempt to communicate their new visions to others with the hope that out of communication will come conversions, community, and eventually a "cultural transformation" whereby the whole population or controlling portions of it come to accept the change. All this accompanied by a reduction in individual stress and the establishment of the revolutionary program as the normal one for achieving the goal culture. These persons with the new visions Wallace describes as "prophets" and their
experiences and behavior as prophetic. The guiding metaphor then is the cultural agent (educator) as prophet.

John Dewey suggests the same metaphor when, in Article V—"The School and Social Progress"—of My Pedagogic Creed, he begins by describing education as "the fundamental method of social progress and reform" and concludes with:

I believe that every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling; that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of the right social growth.

I believe that in this way the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God. Toward the end of Public Education, Cremin refers to this statement by Dewey. It follows Cremin's own statement that:

the fundamental mode of politics in a democratic society is education, and it is in that way over all others that the educator is ultimately projected into politics.

Cremin continues by referring to "the ancient prophetic role" a role implicit in Dewey's statement and described above by Wallace. This prophetic function is to be an essential public function of the educator in a democratic society and consists of "the calling of a people via criticism and affirmation, to their noblest traditions and aspirations." This theme of educator-as-prophet dominates the last chapter of the book where Cremin discusses the New England Puritan use of the word "prophesying" to mean "public teaching." It was this use of the word that they had in mind when they founded Harvard College as "a school for prophets." Public teaching was to reflect commitment, concern and well-formed habits of study and reflection.

Commitment and concern are essential elements of the prophet's function and increasingly occur when, as Dewey puts it, "the most commanding motive for human action is reached" and when "the most genuine springs of human conduct are aroused...." An example of such might be those latter-day New England "prophets," the Congregational missionaries, who arrived in 1820 in what was then the Kingdom of Hawai'i. Both the political and educational histories of the state have been profoundly influenced by these prophet/educators.

Attending the university as a student in 1939, Robert W. Clopton, former senior professor emeritus in the College of Education, analyzed the first twenty-one years of the missionary impact as a social movement where certain forces, circumstances, and events combined to facilitate and hinder "one of the most dramatic and colorful upheavals of the nineteenth century." The resulting analysis covers a series of stages, not unlike those described by Wallace 22 years later. The success of the missionaries as emulators of the prophetic role is evidenced by the fact that in 1841 one fifth of the total population of approximately 100,000 persons had been granted membership in the churches and for every one person admitted several others had not been admitted yet could certainly be classified as Christians by any standard prevailing in a land with a Christian tradition. And, at the end of the same period, the missionaries could report that since their arrival probably a larger number of the Islands' natives had become literate persons at that same time in the entire state of Illinois. Finally, "being practical men, the missionaries instead of making the reorganization of society dependent upon the regeneration of its component members, worked for a revision of the social order so as to make possible the salvation of its human units." Upon close examination it becomes clear that the commanding motive for human action of these prophets is one that clearly links them to the ancient prophetic role but, at the same time, is one that seems inappropriate for a secular institution that would be a school for prophets. The missionaries were called to mission by a vision of what this might become and were called to witness to the Truth as it had been revealed to them. The source of both the vision and the Truth was God himself, and knowledge of this provided these prophets, as it had provided past prophets, with an unshakable confidence whereby they could stand with or against the rich and the powerful and both condemn and condone with authority. Such authority expressed, for example, in the words: "Thus saith the Lord!"

Is there a comparable, yet alternative, source of motivation available to a college of education or university that would aspire to be the school for prophets that Cremin describes or must it be admitted that it is at this very point that the prophet as a potential guiding metaphor breaks down? It is again Dewey who suggests that the joining of art and science can indeed produce this kind of motivation. "Art" is the art of developing human resources to be adapted to social service. The process demands the best of human talent to be guided by the understanding and insights provided by psychology and the other sciences. The outcome of utilizing these scientific resources for the purpose of education is the "right organization of individuals." There are, however, those persons who challenge this binding of art and science, who are suspicious of objectivity, and who are committed to what anthropologist Marvin Harris calls "amoral relativism" that encourages doing one's own thing for one's own self and defeats the
development of cooperation and consensus that are prerequisites for envisioning a clear and defined moral order.24 Such persons (also prophets?) often identify current crises with the operation of more, rather than less, science and technology and challenge objective knowledge as a necessary basis for moral judgment. Instead they substitute raised consciousness for informed action in a manner exemplified a few years ago by Werner Erhardt’s attack on world hunger through good thoughts. Such opposition, Harris suggests, only increases the level of “popular befuddlement” over how science, art, and technology may be joined to intensify, rather than obfuscate, attempts to deal with those unprecedented challenges to humanity.25

But even without this opposition there is no guarantee that the prophet who is guided by a rationally and objectively determined data base will act ultimately in the interest of humankind. For the coolest reason, the most rational arguments may dictate a course of action that precludes presently taking what may be personally painful action and making the sacrifice of present enjoyment so that the future can be chosen over the present in favor of a generation whose faces those in the present will never see.

It is only religious experience that, according to Alexis De Tocqueville, can instill “a general habit of behaving with the future in view,”26 It is religious experience that provides a final aim in life, beyond life, on which persons can fix their eyes and which becomes for them the way they then act in worldly affairs.27 Perhaps De Tocqueville had in mind the passage written by the New Testament writer for whom:

To have faith is to be sure of things we hope for, to be certain of things we cannot see.
It was in faith that all these persons died. They did not receive the things that God had promised, but from a long way off they saw and welcomed them...28

This passage could have been written to describe prophets from Moses to Dr. Martin Luther King.

It is not surprising then that economist Robert Heilbronnner, after reflecting upon the human prospect, concludes that humanity can best be rescued from its increasingly dangerous plight by a monastic organization of society along lines that would blend a religious orientation with military discipline.29

In a similar vein, sociologist Robert Nisbet looks for a major religious reformation before the year 2,000 to provide both charismatic leaders and a willingness and eagerness for sacrifice neither of which are any longer provided by politics. Gone also is that prime motivator a faith in progress where either Christianity or Marxism became the cornerstone and which provided a:

- vision of all humanity in necessary advancement, stage-by-stage, from a remote and primitive past to a distant and glorious future, the whole process an unfolding of initial and providential design.30

It is now appropriate to reiterate our earlier question and add one more. Can there be prophets for whom their prime motivation is something other than revealed Truth, the natural law of the dialectic, or the inevitability of progress that has motivated earlier prophets? Is the metaphor of prophet still useful as a guiding metaphor for those institutions of learning that aspire to be schools of prophets? The answer to both questions, I believe, is yes. But where the prophet/educator departs from what would be a perfect analogy with the ancient prophet tradition must be noted if the metaphor is to be used as a guide to policy and practice.

The motivational source of the prophet/educator’s commitment and concern is his knowledge of the potential that people have for growth. That is, growth as Dewey defines it as the increasing ability of persons in the present to intelligently take something from previous experience and use it in some way to modify the quality of that experience which is to follow.31 While a school for prophets cannot offer the prophet/educator the sense of security provided by models of eternal being or inevitable becoming, it can serve as an enhancement to those skills necessary for obtaining and evaluating evidence of how the impact of some contingencies, as opposed to others, has the potential of producing outcomes that are good, worthy, and have survival value for humankind. It can begin to provide for the prophet/educator the beginnings of a guiding version of how growth may be nurtured so that it leads to further growth and the possible directions that growth might take.

Prophets invariably have been persons of faith. Rather than (or in addition to) being a statement of things unseen, the faith of the prophet/educator develops with the opportunity to participate in activities that enable him to then make intelligent evaluations about the quality of that experience, the nature of its consequences for people, and the probability that an intended outcome will indeed occur. While never promising that the prophet/educator will be able to predict the future with absolute certainty, a school for prophets should equip the prophet/educator with those tools necessary for obtaining and analyzing information necessary for anticipating the possible unforeseen, deferred, aversive consequences of any given behavior or policy. Too often the consequences of a behavior that
result in immediate and positive reinforcement in the present may obscure the consideration of the potential deferred and aversive consequences of that same behavior. The prophet/educator should become acquainted, in a school for prophets, not only with ways for anticipating the deferred aversive consequences of a given behavior or policy but like Charles Dickens’ ghost of Christmas-yet-to-come (also a prophet of sorts), of transmitting such knowledge back into the present so that—through public debate and dialogue—these deferred consequences may begin to have the same power to shape decisionmaking in the present as do those more immediate positively reinforcing consequences.

A school for prophets must prepare the prophet/educator to endure a marginal position—one where he is not at home in a single world of experience. Marginality has generally characterized prophets for whom the present can never become too comfortable. The prophet/educator must learn to avoid the temptation to deal with a period of social crisis and diminished need satisfaction by advocating the assimilation of past, present, and future into a pre-existing pattern of Truth. A school for prophets is one that equips the prophet/educator with the means for identifying that cultural core of shared meaning that can become the basis of consensus. It also provides the prophet/educator, in a pluralistic society, with the kind of multicultural experience that acquaints him with the traditions of various sub-groups and the points at which these ways of life converge and diverge from the larger cultural core thereby providing tentative hypotheses to be tested and possibly to be incorporated into that core. Additionally, a school for prophets must be structured in a way that allows the prophet/educator to experience being an agent of discontinuity. In this role he can become the source of unique intelligently generated alternatives which, while often alien to both the dominant cultural core as well as to the ideals of existing sub-groups, can serve to stimulate communication between groups in preparation for a new integration of the traditional culture of a previous generation with the emerging situational culture of a new generation.

Finally, a school for prophets will emphasize a preoccupation with values—a concern with preferred consequences as judged by their contribution to continued growth, their consistency with the basic ideals of the society as set by the broadest consensus, and their having the fewest anticipated, deferred, aversive consequences.

Can a school for prophets create those conditions whereby the prophet/educator will come to value those generations far in the future and yet unborn? Perhaps, this is more likely to occur in a place like Hawai‘i where the population is still one of immigrants from Asia and the Pacific and their children and grandchildren. Among these groups the sense of family is still strong and persons continue to sacrifice in the present so that life might be better for their children and grandchildren. Hawai‘i is a place that is biologically and culturally in a process of becoming.

Footnotes

5. Ibid., p. 93.
6. Ibid., pp. 36 and 41.
7. Ibid., p. 41.
9. Wallace, op. cit. See pp. 188-189 for a full description of the stages through which such movements pass that are partially referred to below.
10. Ibid., p. 186.
12. Cremin, op. cit., p. 76.
13. Ibid., p. 77.
17. Ibid., p. 1.
18. Ibid., p. 2.
19. Ibid., p. 25.
22. Ibid., p. 263.
24. Ibid., pp. 547-549.