

‘Of necessity the first thing I had to do was to awaken their innermost being itself and stimulate a sense of morality and justice within them in order to make them active, attentive, receptive and obedient for the world outside.’

11 Openness!

It sometimes happens that however well prepared a teacher is, however much effort he puts into his teaching, things just refuse to work. The pupils simply sit there in covert or undisguised protest because they are expected to make an effort. Anything is more interesting than what the teacher is trying to put over about the topic. The diagnosis: *the pupils have shut themselves off*.

It goes without saying that success in the classroom depends not only on the *teacher* but on the *pupils* as well, and the pupils' most important contribution is *openness*.

The way I see it is that our lives are played out between two opposite poles and in every situation the 'art of living' consists in combining them in a liveable synthesis. The fundamental polarity is that between productivity and receptivity: on the one hand a person must *go out of himself, actively engage with the world*, on the other he must *accept facts, be open to impressions*.

One variant of this polarity is the contrast between 'preserving one's integrity', 'warding off influences' and 'opening up', 'exposing oneself'. Both of these are necessary. Self-assertion is required when one has to win through in the 'struggle for existence' or is threatened; when, on the other hand, it is one's own psychological and intellectual growth – *education in the widest sense* – that is at stake, it is the opposite attitude that is required: engaging with things, allowing oneself to be moved, impressed, being open.

Education always involves some kind of *change* in a person. Anyone

11 Openness!

who insists on staying the way he always was is not open to education. Education is therefore always a challenge, a step into the unknown, the uncertain, and often appears threatening. A pupil's heart and mind must be prepared, must have the desire to engage with things that are new to him. First and foremost he must abandon his prejudices, refrain from jumping to conclusions. Pestalozzi himself recognised how counterproductive it is to make premature judgments on things one ought first to become acquainted with through committed learning. He was, he insisted, *not at all in favour of encouraging the children to make apparently mature, though in fact premature, judgments on any object; rather he believed in stopping them from doing that for as long as possible, until they had observed the object they were to comment on from all sides and in different conditions and were fully acquainted with the words that describe its essence and qualities.*

I would like to illustrate these thoughts with an incident from my own experience. For almost twenty years I tried, while I was involved in a special education project, to help sixteen-year-old trainee teachers develop an understanding and appreciation of classical music. My initial aim in this was to get the students to put aside their prejudices and engage with sounds which were unfamiliar to most of them but which are, after all, a significant component of Western culture. I often felt that the premature judgment and consequent dismissal of anything new, instead of listening with an open ear, open to the effect of the music, had become almost standard practice. Once I put on a CD of the aria from Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, played by Glenn Gould, in the very first lesson and asked the students to say what they thought of what they had heard. Their comments were unanimously negative: 'The pianist is obviously a beginner, it's probably a recording made after a few piano lessons.' — 'No, the playing isn't that bad, it just needs to be a bit faster and a bit louder here and there.' — 'The "song" hasn't enough class, no rhythm.' — 'The "song" ought to be played on the violin, then it wouldn't sound bad.' — 'The "song" is too long.' — 'Why is there no one singing?' — 'In a word, this composer isn't up to much.'

After these comments I couldn't resist giving them a bit of a shock. 'Is that what you think?' I said. 'That was composed by one of the greatest geniuses ever and the pianist is one of the most important musicians

of this century. I don't want you to pass judgment, I want you to listen closely to what's happening and to pay attention to what's going on inside you. It's not a question of whether you like the music, but of how far we are all in a position to get something out of it and if possible understand it.' I played the piece again and, lo and behold, the students said what they had really heard and what they had felt inside themselves.

That gave me the opportunity to talk to them about the attitude of *openness* and I was pleased how quickly they came to see the demands that must be made if education is to come about. This attitude of openness could be put into words in the following way: 'I can see the danger, the obstacle to learning, if my attitude to new material is fundamentally sceptical and dismissive and I thus make judgments that are not based on understanding of the matter in question. I am therefore prepared to set aside all my prejudices and to be open to the things I have to deal with and to their effect on me. The extent to which this new material suits me and the way in which I can fit it in with everything that I already have inside me, is something that will happen automatically as I deal honestly and openly with it.'

Just as they have prejudices regarding music, most young people have similar prejudices against art, especially modern art. Many regard it as a con, merely a way of making money. Here too, as with every other topic they are confronted with at school, we must start by getting the pupils to adopt an attitude of openness. Only then will they be prepared to see a picture in its own terms, as a picture and nothing else, to look at it objectively, to allow it to speak to them. Thus my pupils learnt to appreciate the fundamental difference between the question, 'What's that supposed to be?' and the question, 'What is that?' Anyone asking the first question is already convinced it's a load of rubbish; anyone asking the second is open and ready to accept an answer.

For us teachers that naturally leads to the question of how we can produce this open, receptive attitude, the readiness to learn and change, in our pupils. For that we need something that helps a pupil to open up, without which it is even impossible for some — *genuine authority*. Had I not sensed, in the class with the trainee teachers, that I was accepted by them and that therefore what I said counted for something, I would certainly have refrained from my 'shock tactics'. To engage with something

11 Openness!

new is always a challenge, and the trust created by genuine authority encourages pupils to accept the challenge. And the pupils' trust in their teacher will allow him — at least in the higher years — to keep bringing up the question of openness and thus make it clear that he expects them to open up to new topics.

We can only achieve openness as a general basic attitude on the part of the pupils if we take constant care to ensure that the pupils *can* open up. That is only possible if the atmosphere in the class is calm. If one bombards them with information and tasks, this atmosphere will be destroyed and the pupils will go on the defensive. Openness can only be created and maintained when we give every word its due weight and give the pupils time to understand its meaning and to allow it to have effect. It is also important that the pupils be able to sense that the teacher himself is engaged with what he is saying. If we are not ourselves involved with the food for the mind we present to our pupils, it will leave them cold as well.

The teacher's authority automatically brings to mind the converse on the part of the pupils: *obedience* and *discipline*. Only pupils who are obedient and disciplined are capable of learning. But since it has become difficult to talk about obedience and discipline nowadays, I will treat them in more detail in separate chapters. It will turn out that the openness I demand here is, in a certain respect, identical to obedience and discipline.