Professors and Grandparents

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PROFESSORS AND GRANDPARENTS

Robert Mugerauer

One benefit of current academic turmoil is a lively dialogue concerning the nature of education. I would like to contribute to that dialogue by considering a form of thought especially suited to reveal the essentially personal and dynamic character of our subject. It has long been held that human understanding proceeds by finding new resemblances and relations in old materials. And as Aristotle noted long ago, we do this in large part by using metaphors.

Let us try a bit of metaphorical thinking.

We should remember, though, that metaphors can be dangerous; they are all too easily misunderstood. Nevertheless, the project may help us to understand more profoundly the vexing issues of education. To be sure, this project makes some assumptions that would need to be justified elsewhere — assumptions, for example, about what metaphor and thought are and what they have to do with each other. But for our immediate purposes, this working definition of metaphor will do: metaphor is a double vision. That is, in metaphor we have at once two sorts of meanings which, though in tension, are yet united by a single organizational principle. There is the ordinary or literal meaning of the terms and there is the "new possible" meaning that arises out of the novel juxtaposition of the several ordinary senses of the terms.

What happens, then, if we twin some ordinary terms, if we wonder what it means to think that "the professor is a grandparent"?

Unpacking this metaphor is a delicate affair because we need to work out in ordinary language an approximation of the metaphorical meaning without taking the metaphor literally. We're not concerned, for example, with statistical information about the genetic relations of faculty and students. Rather, we are trying to see anew what teachers are and what they should be doing. In all this I don't pretend to do more than propose a metaphor and to suggest that it might be fruitful to contemplate it as an image of the nature and goal of our educational community.

Consider two clusters of tendencies or characteristics of grandparents which might metaphorically revolve around the professor-grandparent relationship. Keep in mind that in speaking of one at the same time.

A grandparent is not a parent, nor an authority over their children. Afterall, children's health, good habits, economic wellbeing, and so on. In contrast to some of these pressing needs (achievement). Traditionally, grandparents aren't always required for principal reasons why they are sometimes visited? But this isn't to say that the welfare of grandchildren or the absence of grandparents are a necessary concern.

There is, then, an important grandparent. And this is healthy within the whole, all is provided for itself as a dilemma to the child-rearing relationships and not be compared to the grandchildren are free to live in grandparental care.

In contrast to the reasonable practical concerns of the parent, the imaginative. The grandparents are not proffer what breaks against or goes against, of course, because the latter is proffered against the ground of the parental, the imagination is the heartland of growth itself.

This leads us to a second cluster. From the child's point of view, in an important way, the relationships, for example, insofar as grandparental experience is that they have "seen" and that grandparents are in a unique position to have lived through the educational community.
GRANDPARENTS

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Ordinary terms, if we wonder what-grandparent"? fair because we need to work of the metaphorical meaning not concerned, for example, in relations of faculty and students. teachers are and what they should be than propose a metaphor and to it as an image of the nature characteristics of grandparents which might metaphorically reveal new insights into the qualities of teachers. Keep in mind that in speaking of grandparents we are speaking of professors at the same time.

A grandparent is not a parent. Note that parents have an immediate authority over their children. After all, the parents are responsible for the children's health, good habits, education, socialization, religious training, daily welfare, and so on. In contrast, grandparents enjoy a relaxed distance from some of these pressing needs (though, of course, not from their ultimate achievement). Traditionally, grandparents are permitted to indulge or spoil a grandchild a bit, or at least they often do what a parent cannot. For example, they may give extra bits of candy or other treats to their grandchildren ("You shouldn't have . . ."); they may tell stories about the parents that go some way to undermine the parental image and authority or put it in perspective ("When your father was seven he did . . . too."). In short, grandparents aren't always required to be practical. And isn't this one of the principal reasons why they are so dear to us, and why we look forward to their visits? But this isn't to say that grandparents are not interested in the welfare of grandchildren or that they are irresponsible. Rather, it is to note that grandparents are a necessary counterbalance or complement to parents.

There is, then, an important and necessary tension between parent and grandparent. And this is healthy for the grandchild and for the whole family; within the whole, all is provided. Of course, this tension should not present itself as a dilemma to the children. They must be free to dwell in both relationships and not be compelled to choose between them. For a time grandchildren are free to live in the overlapping lands of parental and grandparental care.

In contrast to the reasonable world which results from the immediately practical concerns of the parent, the realm of the grandparents appears imaginative. The grandparents are free to dare this and that, to venture and proffer what breaks against or goes beyond what must be (and only, of course, because the latter is provided by the parent). Against the steady ground of the parental, the imaginative is a realm of the greatest importance: it is the heartland of growth itself.

This leads us to a second cluster of characteristics of grandparents. From the child's point of view, grandparents are connected to the "strange." In an important way, they live in the non-immediate, the non-practical. For example, insofar as grandparents "were there," they are part of a world not experienced by the young. They may have actually experienced the matter under discussion, or they may have intellectually participated in some truth. That is, they have "seen" and they can "say" what they have seen. Grandparents are in a unique position to introduce strange worlds which
appear wondrous to the natural and spontaneous curiosity of the young. There are new places to visit with grandparents, often spatial ones, always temporal and intellectual ones; there are possibilities and world views alive in the person of the grandparent which can be inhabited imaginatively.

For a literary example: in Ray Bradbury's *Dandelion Wine*, the boy Douglas has discovered that Colonel Freeleigh expands his world by helping him travel to new places: Ching Ling Soo's 1910 magic show in Boston, Pawnee Bill "on the prairie way back in '75," and the Civil War. The colonel is a time machine whom Douglas enthusiastically visits several times a week. Douglas describes the precious experience to his friend:

He talks, you listen. And the more he talks the more he gets you to peering around and noticing things. He tells you you're riding on a very special train, by gosh, and sure enough its true. He's been down the track, and knows. And now here we come, you and me, along the same track, but further on, and so much looking and sniffing and handling things to do, you need old Colonel Freeleigh to shove and say look alive so you remember every second! So when kids come around when you're real old, you can do for them what the colonel once did for you. That's the way it is, Tom, I got to spend a lot of time visiting him and listening so I can go far-traveling with him as often as he can.

Douglas knows that the world of the grandparent is not musty, dead, or quaintly antique; on the contrary, it is intensely alive and absorbing, wondrous, and exuberant. Douglas needs to enter that world in order to enrich his own sensibility; it is integral to youthful self-discovery. That is the real point: contact with that world makes him alive.

This is the rare quality of the imaginative. We simply dwell in it, timeless. It is neither past nor present nor future; it is all at once. Insofar as it is alive, it is vital for our future: it is magic.

One more example: in his fantastic book *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel Garcia-Marquez treats the alchemy of change at work in those fully alive. Through several generations, a South American family, the Buendias, has forged its own tradition. Succeeding generations have contact with Melquiades, a timeless man of magic and old wisdom, who appears and disappears mysteriously and whose parchments hold the key to the meaning of the cosmos and to their lives. In time, a great grandson of the family, Aureliano Segundo,

... set about deciphering the manuscripts. It was impossible. The letters looked more like musical notation than writing. One hot noontime, while he was poring over the manuscripts, he sensed that he was not alone in the room. Against the light from the window, sitting with his hands on his knees, was Melquiades. He was under forty years of age. He was wearing the same old-fashioned vest and the hat that looked like a raven's wings, and across his pale temples there flowed the grease from his hair that had been melted by the heat, just as Aureliano and Jose Arcadio had seen him when they were children. Aureliano Segundo recognized him at once, because the hereditary memory had been transmitted from generation to generation and had come to him through the memory of his grandfather.

But this is just the beginning, the colonel says. Segundo has yet to grasp and live the dangers of petrification and losing the key to the past; he should be apparent, the world the colonel has discovered, and to stave off the dangers of petrification and losing the key to the past, he should engage themselves in possibility, in dialogue with their grandparents and their grandparents' grandparents.

In short, grandparents are the key to the future: a vision of what could be for the present: grandparents might be able to liberate someone who is trapped or have a person can decide who he is and what he can become.

Of course, any visit with grandparents is a life-time, or half a lifetime. Somewhat sad when one becomes an adult (and eventually), but one may return home free from the past. This is possible if one freely makes time for the present: grandparents make possible by the mutual care and concern.

Practically — and the very word is in itself a metaphor — to our immediate responsibility of the academic community or family, we must understand what teachers might do about the present problem: a recent arrival is to be a parent, or when kids come around when kids come around when kids come around, one may return home free from the past. This is possible if one freely makes time for the present: grandparents make possible by the mutual care and concern.

Correspondingly, the profession of the professor is in either. When this happens, as to the profession of the professor, we must understand what teachers might do about the present problem: a recent arrival is to be a parent, or when kids come around when kids come around when kids come around, one may return home free from the past. This is possible if one freely makes time for the present: grandparents make possible by the mutual care and concern.
ous curiosity of the young. But this is just the beginning, the occasion to learn and to grow: Aureliano Segundo has yet to grasp and live out the truths which lie before him. As should be apparent, the world that the young can be connected to cannot be passively encountered, or passed on like a dead flower. If that is understood, the dangers of petrification and sterility may be avoided. The young must engage themselves in possibility, must develop the habit of entering into dialogue with their grandparents, with the tradition, and with their own world. And they are naturally eager to do so.

In short, grandparents are connected with a living past. Further, from their vantage point beyond the immediately practical, they have a vision of the future: a vision of what could be hoped for. And this is of great import for the present: grandparents make possible a time of freedom, a time liberated from any demands beyond those of personal growth, a time when a person can decide who he is and will be.

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Of course, any visit with grandparents ends, be it a weekend, a summer, or half a lifetime. Somewhat sadly perhaps, one must go home; one must become an adult (and eventually, one may hope, a grandparent who helps continue the natural cycle — and that is not sad). But here is the great hope: one may return home free from intellectual and spiritual provincialization. This is possible if one freely makes one's own home in light of that vision made possible by the mutual caring of grandparent and grandchild.

Practically — and the very word brings some of the sadness of returning to our immediate responsibility — this sort of thinking seems to help us understand what teachers might be. At the least, it may expose one source of our present problem: a recent tendency to characterize the professor as "pal." If our metaphorical thinking is correct, great harm would be done by forming an educational system in which the professor is a peer (in a strict sense), merely "one of the gang." This would result in the destruction of the academic community or family, just as a parallel confusion would break up the delicate balances of the ordinary family.

Correspondingly, the professor must not be confused with the parent either. When this happens, as too often in the past, the proper balance between parent and grandparent is destroyed and with it the complete environment required for growth. This would be the case when the professor tries to be a parent, or when the parent rejects the grandparent in the name of the practical, thus ending responsible freedom.

Of course, it is always possible for a metaphor to be misconstrued. Even valid metaphors are reduced to nonsense by the literal minded. In addition, there is the danger of misapprehending the qualities of grandparents which metaphorically inform our understanding of professors. This would happen...
if one supposed that grandparents, and therefore professors, are essentially senile old fogies or are members of a conservative power elite. The destructive power of such a misconception is seen, for example, in One Hundred Years of Solitude when José Arcadio Buendia, the patriarch of the family, has the painful experience of loss of imagination and hence of the ability to dwell outside of the present ("The time machine has broken"): Those who refuse him and his imagination in the name of the practical tie him to the trunk of a chestnut tree in the yard, where he eventually dies because he is caught between reality and the infinite dream world.

In fact, such confusion as to the nature of grandparents is frequent in our society and may be responsible, in part, for both the chaos in education and for our treatment of the aged. The objection to our metaphor on the ground that such negative characteristics are essential to grandparents probably shows more about our attitudes than it does about either grandparents or about the nature of education. Reflection on this (mis)interpretation would be worthwhile, though for a purpose somewhat different from our present one. That is another story, and perhaps another metaphor.

Another danger: it is also possible to apply a perverse literalism to the complement of our metaphor, "the student as child." If we consider the child as utterly uninformed, dependent, mere potentiality or raw material, then authoritarian education follows. But confusion also follows if we romanticize the child as a "repository of all wisdom." Applied to education, the naive view that "the student is a sage" obliterates the obvious differences between student and teacher and thus frustrates the complementary participation of each. If, as some elements of the counterculture aver, the student knows it all, then education is unnecessary. Both views are mistaken; one substitutes authority, the other vanity, in place of the wonder and humility and mutuality of the relationship between grandchild and grandparent.

I mentioned Aristotle at the beginning of this reflection. If we recall that he was the teacher of Alexander the Great, we cannot, I'm fairly certain, think of him as parent (Phillip would not have stood for it); certainly he was not "Alex's buddy." Grandparent comes close, though we might want to try other metaphors.

One final observation: our metaphor constantly leads us to think of education in terms of freedom: freedom from the immediately practical; from present spatial and temporal bounds, from intellectual and moral provincialism, from destructive tendencies in education. This leads me to suspect that the metaphor is a good guide to education as concerned with personal regard to each other, and with the love of wisdom. This would bring us to the love of wisdom... not teacher who tries to lead his student to love it and seek it.
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