

Response to “Buberian Learning Groups: The Quest for Responsibility in Education for Peace” by Haim Gordon and Jan Demarest

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As the first (and thus far the only) Muslim member of the international team evaluating the Education for Peace project, I visited Beersheva for a week in March 1981. My response to the paper by Gordon and Demarest evaluating the two-year history of the project is based both on my immediate recollections of my visit (recorded in a report submitted in June 1981 to the chairman of the Project Steering Committee and Department of Education, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheva) and my subsequent reflections on what I observed and experienced during my visit.

To conceive of an educational program such as the Education for Peace project, particularly in the setting of Israel, requires both imagination and boldness. Dr. Gordon deserves recognition and commendation for his ability to translate a number of Martin Buber's ideas about dialogue into a philosophy of education and to test this philosophy in a real-life encounter between Jews and Arabs. To me the Education for Peace project is exciting and challenging both as concept and as actuality. The fact that it has shortcomings does not diminish either its uniqueness or its significance.

When I visited the project I was struck very forcefully by the spirit of most of its members. Having grown up under the shadows of an unceasing war, these young persons—Jews and Arabs alike—seemed to me to long so deeply for peace that they were willing to endure the pain of dialogue with the other (perceived, in fact, as the “enemy”) in order to overcome the fear and the hatred that lead human beings to destroy each other. I believe that most, if not all, who entered the project were earnestly in search of a solution to the complicated problem of peaceful coexistence of Jew and Arab in present-day Israeli society. I believe that the project taught them how to decrease the “existential mistrust” between Jews and Arabs and led in some cases (I observed at least two instances personally) to the establishing of an authentic one-to-one relationship between a Jew and an Arab.

Dialogue with oneself and with the other entails a confrontation with existential reality. This reality is often painful to deal with. I admire Dr. Gordon for being able to teach the project members “the art of confrontation” through which they were able to look at the pain that lay deeply embedded in their psyche. To be able to acknowledge and articulate thoughts and feelings that have been buried under mounds of defensive behavior certainly has a

cathartic effect. But confronting the bitter truth, though it might make us “free” (as the Gospel of St. John 8:32 tells us), is not in and of itself the ultimate goal of dialogue. To me the ultimate goal of I-Thou dialogue is becoming whole or fully human. To achieve this goal, more than the art of confrontation is required. What is needed is the art of loving, my definition of love being that relatedness to the other which makes possible both the healing and the growing of the other.

When I visited the project I had the distinct impression that a number of members—both Jews and Arabs—felt that though they had come a long way in their journey toward better self-understanding and understanding of the other, they were now stuck in an impasse from which even Buber could not rescue them. This sense of being unable to move forward, to bridge the gap between thought and action, led to a feeling of frustration sometimes bordering on despair. To me Dr. Gordon and Dr. Demarest appear to be describing the same feeling when they identify as the project’s “most immediate” problem the difficulty of translating “the pain discovered and expressed in dialogue into an active responsibility for furthering peace.” I hear them saying, in other words, that although dialogue makes the project members aware of the “distortions” of their mode of existence, this awareness does not necessarily lead to an “attempt to unravel these distortions.” The writers attribute this “noncreative” attitude to a “lack of courage” and a “lack of readiness,” which they regard as “the two personal responses to pain that we found most difficult to surmount.”

In my report I had pointed out what seemed to me to be fundamental problems with the project’s orientation and management. I believe that answers to some of the basic questions raised by this paper may be found in what I stated then. Since then, however, I have reflected more deeply on what authentic dialogue is and does, and have come to see with greater clarity than I did a year ago that the main reason the Education for Peace project is unable, in fact, to educate for peace is because the dialogue that is the means of this education is, in some ways, incomplete and inauthentic.

I do not believe that I-Thou dialogue is possible between persons who are significantly unequal in their relationship. For this reason authentic dialogue is not possible between a master and a slave or between most husbands and wives. Dialogue between Jews and Arabs is a virtual impossibility in Israel given the fact that Jews and Arabs are not equal in that society and that the Israeli Arabs are in a particularly vulnerable position, being mistrusted by many among Israeli Jews as well as Palestinian Arabs.

Not only is Dr. Gordon aware of this fact of inequality between Jews and Arabs in Israel, but he is also committed to preserving that inequality. His statement on this point is clear and candid. He says: “As initiator of the Education for Peace project I firmly believe that Israel should be a Jewish state, and not a Palestinian or secular state where Jews and Arabs live together. . . . In other words, like most of my fellow Jews, I accept the

sociopolitical structure of Israel as a Jewish state in which Arab citizens will continue to be a minority whose national aspirations will not be realized.”

One of the basic questions that haunts a number of sensitive Jews and Arabs in the project is: If the inequality in status between Jew and Arab in the larger Israeli society is to remain unchanged, what then is the purpose of teaching Jews and Arabs in the project the art of relating to each other as if they were equal? I remember a young Jewish woman in the project telling me with a lot of agony: “I feel as if the project is a game that we play. We pretend that we are all equal while all the time we know that we are not. Sometimes I feel that it would be kinder to stop pretending, to simply accept the fact that we are living in an unfair society, an unfair world.” And I also recall the words of a young Arab man who spoke perhaps for many in his group when he said, “I feel that the real purpose of the project is to give us an opportunity to express our anger so that we would be emotionally neutralized and become passive.”

The I-Thou mode of relating requires that the I and the Thou treat each other justly, not being exploitative or manipulative in any way. Where justice is lacking, the I-Thou dialogue degenerates into an I-It mode of communication. I believe that all three Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—establish a necessary connection between justice and peace. My paramount theological and ethical problem with the Education for Peace project is that it appears to promote the view that one can educate for peace without educating for justice. It seems to me profoundly ironic that the project members are told to find “just principles” for solving Jewish-Arab problems in the context of the Rawls Workshop but not in the context of real life.

The inequality between Jew and Arab in Israeli society is reflected in the project not only in terms of the conflicting and confusing messages given to the members regarding what authentic dialogue is or should be but also in terms of its management and curriculum. At no point have the Arabs felt that they had an equal share in the project. The main reason underlying this feeling is that there have been very few Arabs in leadership positions and the attitude of at least some Jews has been overly proprietary and patronizing. The lack of suitable Islamic sources in the curriculum is another problem of serious import, as I pointed out in my report.

“We know of no one way of educating for courage” say Gordon and Demarest. I agree with them in identifying courage as essential for bringing about change in one’s mode of being. But I believe that authentic dialogue does educate for courage since it makes it possible for us to discover that which fragments our inner unity or impedes our growth. For instance, a major problem that most human beings have to face is the problem of guilt. In the Education for Peace project (as in Israel) many Jews and Arabs feel guilty. Many Jews feel guilty because they see Jews as oppressing Arabs even though they are not personally responsible for the oppression. Many Arabs feel guilty because they do not see themselves as contributing effectively to the cause of

the Palestinian Arabs regardless of whether they can. No human being can avoid incurring some guilt in life, but as John Sanford points out in *Between People*, it is important to distinguish between real guilt and false guilt.

The former we need to accept because it belongs to us. The latter we need to reject because it is not ours. . . . We really are guilty when we go against our own nature. We need to accept this guilt as our own, for it belongs to us. We may not like it, but it is ours. But there is this redeeming fact: While false guilt diminishes our personality, real guilt does not. When we assume false guilt we are destroyed by it, but when we honestly carry the guilt that belongs to us we become bigger, not smaller, in personality. Of course it is painful. Any guilt is painful. We do not want to acknowledge our real guilt. We even prefer our false guilts to our real guilts because . . . the former allow us to retain our egocentricity, but the latter require us to give it up. We complain about both kinds of guilt, but we are secretly in alliance with the false guilt. Yet it is the real guilt that can heal us. If we can manage to summon up the courage to face our real omissions and failures in life, we can begin to grow. It is the painful truth that makes us free.¹

Authentic dialogue makes possible the facing of “the real guilt” and “the painful truth” because it is rooted in that relatedness which I call love. As I mentioned in my report, during my visit to the project I felt that some staff members were emotionally sterile and did not understand how important the “heart” is in any kind of meaningful dialogue. They had learned about confrontation but not about compassion and thought that they could carry on a dialogue with the other with the detachment of a surgeon performing an operation under clinical conditions. By learning the technique of dialogue one can confront the other with the hurt within. But mere confronting of the hurt will not lead to healing. In fact, it can sometimes be very dangerous, for it can cause a person to fall apart totally under the pressure of the internal pain. Rabindra Nath Tagore said, “He only may chastise who loves.” I believe that it is also correct to say that only that person may dialogue (or confront) who loves. Jesus’ golden words “Love thy neighbor as thyself” are, in fact, the foundational principle of authentic dialogue, for if I could love the other as myself then I would be willing not only to confront the other with the “painful truth” but also to share in the pain.

By and large I did not feel that the primary concern in the Education for Peace project was with sharing the pain that was discovered through dialogue. Without such sharing there can be no healing and without healing there is no growth. Courage, as Rollo May points out in *The Courage to Create*, “requires a centeredness within our own being, without which we would feel ourselves to be a vacuum. The ‘emptiness’ within corresponds to an apathy without; and apathy adds up, in the long run to cowardice.”² In other words, “lack of courage” as well as “lack of readiness” reflects a lack of

“centeredness within our own being.” Through authentic dialogue one can help the other to find wholeness, and a centeredness within the wholeness, and thereby make it possible for the other to act with courage. The word *courage* comes from the same stem as the French word *coeur*, meaning “heart.” I believe that members of the Education for Peace project would act with more courage and readiness than they have done in the past if more heart were put into the project. How that is to be done I do not know. There is no magic formula for establishing authentic dialogue nor is such dialogue merely an intellectual or academic pursuit that can be conducted by technically trained personnel. “The fact that talent is plentiful but passion is lacking seems to me to be a fundamental facet of the problem of creativity in many fields today” observes Rollo May,³ and this lack of passion is a major reason for the barrenness of so many dialogues going on in this decade of dialogue. I believe that the ability to touch the deepest levels of the other’s self requires a kind of “gift from heaven.” Perhaps the project needs more people with such a gift.

But one thing that can and should be done is to introduce into the curriculum the concept of “roots,” leading to a deep exploration of what it means to be Jewish-Israeli and Islamic-Arabic. The religious dimension of both Jewish and Arab identity was conspicuously missing from classroom discussions when I visited the project. I was also surprised and concerned to find out that neither Jews nor Arabs in the project were clearly aware of the intimate connection between their roots and their “center.” I gather from the paper that now there is a weekly lecture on subjects such as “Jewish history, Arab history, Islam, Judaism, etc.” While such lectures are certainly a useful addition to the program, in-depth research needs to be done to locate sources (particularly Islamic) that can be used to sensitize the project members to each other’s cultural and religious consciousness through time and space.

And, finally: What, in my judgment, is the good that has come out of the Education for Peace project? Much good, I believe, has come out of it even though it has not succeeded in a direct manner in fulfilling what was perhaps the initiator’s central aim, namely, to educate for peace. With all its imperfections, the project has provided a setting—perhaps the only one in Israel—where Jews and Arabs can meet as persons and not as stereotypes. It has also taught its members the art of confronting much that is difficult to accept, thus releasing them from the bondage of repression and passive suffering. The project has made its members aware of both the need for and the possibility of acquiring deeper knowledge and wisdom as well as greater maturity and strength of character even within the constraints imposed on them by the larger reality that encompasses them. I believe that each Jew or Arab who has entered the project with commitment has learned from it and has somehow become more fully human as a result of engaging in dialogical encounter with other Jews and Arabs. All of this constitutes a considerable good and all of this I personally value. However, what is for me the highest

good that has come out of the Education for Peace project is that it has provided to a few human beings—Jews and Arabs—the opportunity to transcend the enmity and alienation of the ages and to be able to love the other despite all that separates them. This seems to me to be the project's greatest vindication.

Notes

- 1 John Sanford, *Between People* (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1982), pp. 61-65.
- 2 Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. 3.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 88.