

1977 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

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I want to say a few things about discrimination and education. Naturally you assume that I plan to talk about admission quotas, upward mobility and reverse discrimination. Those are indeed important topics. Everyone knows about them, and most people in education are talking about them. They are crucial social and legal issues, and they pose challenges at both the theoretical and the practical levels.

But since they are known to be important, I want to talk about discrimination in different terms. The word "discrimination" falls casually from all tongues today and usually refers to a bad or objectionable action, the act of discriminating against someone. This kind of discrimination is born of prejudice and thrives in oppression. When the word is used in a volatile social and political context, it tends to simplify, to draw an uncrossable circle around itself and invite the pointed finger of condemnation. And it tends to erase all other shades of meaning from the term itself.

I want to talk about an altogether different kind of discrimination. Before it gets itself applied to social realities, the word means "to make clear distinctions, to distinguish, to differentiate." And someone who is discriminating will be able to draw fine distinctions; will be perceptive, even fastidiously selective. The word used to be often used – not much anymore – to refer to someone as being of "discriminating taste." Discrimination in this sense is an act of the mind doing the discriminating. It may have application to or may affect the real world, but the discrimination itself is in the sense essentially mental. Discrimination in the bad sense, discrimination against other individuals or groups, is basically a political, physical act, with the use of some kind and degree of force. The distinction I am making is that discrimination in the favorable sense of making fine distinctions is basically a matter of mind, subjectivity; and discrimination in the unfavorable sense of discriminating against is basically a matter of power relations in the world, the objectively real. I am using the word "real" to suggest that discriminations in both senses are real, one subjectively the other objectively. We would easily assent to the concrete evidence when we observe signs of "discriminating against" – objectively real political or social discrimination. But we are inclined to think of things of the mind as being less real – not just different in kind to material realities but different, and inferior in worth. We are still the products, in our assumptions about realities and values, of mechanistic science and the American dream. Neither could be

said to be wrong, but both believed in implicitly, absolutely and unquestioningly, produce error. Certainly developments in science from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries have made it possible for us to get a better hold on the world we live in. And certainly the American dream of improving our lot through material success is not lost. There is a little of Ben Franklin in all of us. But our practical-minded, outward-looking proclivities tend to make us obsessed with asserting ourselves over the objective realities and finally believing only in them. Like concern with "discriminating against," valuing real and practical action in the real world drives out of our minds any reminders that that is only half of reality, not all of it.

Year after year I am confronted by students whose response to mind realities is, "Ah, that's only subjective." Subjectivity in grading is a crime. It comes to be that only the measurable and the measurements are real – and discrimination (in the good sense) seems to have nothing to do with it. We give ourselves entirely to objective realities, and, in doing so, like Dr. Jekyll, we would willfully destroy half our natures in realizing the other half. What we forget is that we always bring our full human nature into all situations. The subjectivity is always there, before we teachers shape students into bell-shaped curves. We cannot deny our subjective natures, only delude ourselves into thinking that we have overcome them. We only devalue, bury and try to forget them. We need to become more discriminating. And that is what has been devalued. There is nothing wrong with the practical action. We cannot forget that parents and the public are making investments in education and expect a return. But we are not in danger of that. We know all too well the realities of productivity, accountability and common course numbering schemes. I know that we need no reminding of objective realities every time a student asks, "But what can I do with an English major?"

The best answer I can give is: become discriminating. I was going to cite Francis Bacon's statement that "knowledge is power" to make my point. The idea that knowledge is power seems to imply that that power is over the world of physical objects. My point is: we need to be reminded that since knowledge itself is a matter of mind reality, we should also refer the questions of power to that dimension. We should consider powers in and of the mind in and for themselves. Interestingly enough, when I looked back into Bacon's works to find that statement, I found him voicing my very concern about education. In *The Advancement of Learning* he says, "First, therefore, amongst so many great foundations of colleges in Europe, I find strange that they are all dedicated to professions, and none left free to arts and sciences at large. For if men judge that learning should be referred to action, they judge well; but in this they fall into the error described in the ancient fable, in which the other parts of the body did suppose the stomach had been idle, because it neither performed the office of motion, as the limbs do, nor of sense, as the head doth: but yet notwithstanding it is the stomach that

digested and distributed to all the rest. So if any man think philosophy and universality to be idle studies, he doth not consider that all professions are from thence served and supplied.”

Bacon's complaint still pertains in our time. But I would go further. His concern is still with ends and with education as means – that education be applied. I would argue that we need to learn to respect again those plays and objects of the mind for their own sake. Whatever the discipline, and whatever we intend to do with our education, the activity of learning itself, the play of realities in the subjective world, is vital to our nature. And learning is too implicitly assumed to be merely a means. Our purposes are too often only ulterior. The acts of developing our mathematical, logical and verbal powers, and no less our powers of imagination, are good and desirable in themselves. And those powers need, for justification, no reference outward to applications in the objective world. We too easily divide ourselves into practical, objective-looking beings, doers; and subjective, passive idlers. Movies, crossword puzzles, cryptograms, novels, games of logic and word-play are felt to be of no wotyh – or at most mere recreation – when we go about the serious business of life.

We need to reconsider education as involving our entire being, our subjective and objective relations. And we need to learn again to appreciate the fact that our inner and outer natures cannot be separated. We cannot function effectively except by recognizing that we are in the world and that it is what it is. And we need to admit that it is we who are in the world, entire human beings. We need to return to that essential relation in considering the values in as well as the purposes of education. To quote a twentieth-century philosopher, our experiencing reality is "an identity of the external and the internal and not a projection of the internal in the external." In other words, not an ego-assertion of the human being against other beings and objects alien to himself.

We need to better understand the inseparability of inner and outer realities. We need to strive to understand the complex interrelations, in which the subjective world is not to be depreciated. We may even eventually come to appreciate the fact there is intrinsic value in subjective discipline and discriminating taste.