Education is existentially valid only when it helps an individual live authentically in the light of his own self-discovered, self-defined, and deepest meanings.

We are beings who seek meaning, and we typically find it in creating a story of our lives, a narrative of our existence, a framework of significance within which we may evaluate the “determinants” of our lives — and also transcend them in self-defined trajectories of hope towards existentially compelling goals. This meaning reflects a person’s best knowledge and most compelling intuitions about his origins, what he should be doing in this life, and where (if anywhere at all) all of this might be leading after his last mortal breath. Thus, the stories that one tells himself and others about his life both rest upon and reveal what the existentialist theologian Paul Tillich (1957) called that person’s ultimate concerns.

To the degree that a person is in touch with and acting from the ultimate concern(s) at the core of his existence, his life is charged with the electricity of meaning. Without meaning, no set of circumstances, however pleasant, can ultimately sustain or satisfy a human being. With meaning, no set of circumstances, however difficult, can ultimately defeat an individual, who can find purpose, even joy, in the midst of his pain.

In *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl (1967), a Jewish psychiatrist who survived the Nazi concentration camps, noted that many individuals found meaning in their lives — even a connection with God — in the midst of their horrors. Conversely, the pampered trophy wife driving a Mercedes Benz around Rodeo Drive in Beverley Hills, buying opulent ornaments and luxurious clothing, and getting cosmetic surgery every time she notices a wrinkle marring her Barbie Doll “perfection” can, and often does, lead a life of despair born of meaninglessness. Drugs may dull the existential pain of the vacuity of
her life, but that brief escape only lasts until the next fix. Without meaning, any set of circumstances ultimately becomes an existential trap — a void and prison. With meaning, any set of circumstances, however painful, becomes the ground from which the individual can create an ever richer narrative of his life. In psychotherapy the task is often not so much to change the client’s external conditions as to help him change his understanding of them, to discover how they may fit together to deepen his view of his existence and to create a constructive thrust towards a significant future (White & Epston 1990). Psychological pain is often a result of narrative rupture; when that is the case, therapy becomes narrative reconstruction.

When I speak of transcendence, I am not necessarily referring to something beyond this world. The individual may find his ultimate meaning in this world, and this world alone, just as another may find it in something beyond this world. But in either case, the meaning that the person discovers in his life is transcendent because it is the “bird’s eye view” above the specific circumstances of his life. It is this transcendent view that gives meaning to his life. Education that helps teachers and students further their life-narratives is education for meaning, and it is the only form of education that is existentially vital and valid.

It is this view of education for existential significance that I want to explore in this article. Because I am drawing upon some basic ideas in existentialist philosophy, it is necessary to discuss a few of the most important ideas from that school of philosophy, which dominated the 20th Century and continue to exert a significant sway in this century.¹

**Basic Ideas in Existentialist Philosophy**

The central idea in existentialist philosophy and psychology is that the most important thing that a person can do in life is to discover what is most important to him at the deepest level — and then to honor, explore, and extend that commitment or set of commitments as best he can in his unique lifeworld. To do this comprises what Existentialism calls one’s “life-project.” To pursue it courageously is what Existentialism calls living in good faith — and this is the height of ethical living according to existentialist ethics. Living in bad faith, on the other hand, resides in either not trying to discover what is most meaningful to oneself in one’s life — or (even worse) knowing it but not living in it or up to it. It is a false life and thus the breeding ground of emotional despair, intellectual dishonesty, interpersonal phonyness, and political servitude.

According to Existentialism, when an individual is living authentically in the light of his own self-discovered, self-defined, and therefore best and deepest meanings, he is a “being-for-himself” (Camus 1970; Sartre 1956). This does not mean mere selfishness. It simply means that one is living true to oneself, one’s deepest intuitions about oneself, and, in that sense, for oneself. When a person tries to live according to someone else’s program or image of what he should be, and not on the basis of his best ethical sense about the meaning(s) of his life, then that person no longer lives for himself. He lives for others. Existentialism calls this “being-for-others.”

Being-for-others has nothing to do with altruism or a sense of service to others. Indeed, a person who is being-for-others may be a crass materialist ever in search of more money and possessions. Such a person is not really being-for-himself if he is living in this way simply because he is mindlessly conforming to a soulless norm in a materialistic society. Postmodern American society is a good example of this. After many years of absorbing wave after wave of explicit and implicit messages in the media that the faster the car, the bigger the house and the easier the sex, the better; and after many years of subtle messages in schools and universities that what matters most is scoring high on standardized tests and landing a lucrative job — after all of this, the individual is not really living true to himself, not being-for-himself, but is aping a degraded and degrading social norm. He is conforming to the crowd, being-for-others. Conversely, someone who has devoted his energy and resources in the service of others because this answers to his highest vision of things has realized the goal of being-for-himself in honoring his most authentically and intensely felt convictions.

Existentialist psychotherapy sees being-for-others as the root of neurosis (May & Yalom 1995). When we are untrue to who we are as individuals, the result is feelings of guilt (for having betrayed our-
selves), panic (which always stems from losing touch with one’s own being, a form of death), and disorientation (because one’s life is no longer guided by the North Star of self-awareness). To be-for-others means that one has become “objectified” — an object of someone else’s purposes, program, or perspective.

The same is true at the political level. In a consumer society, individuals tend to lose their status as individuals (or subjects) and become objects to be economically and politically manipulated, largely through statistical analysis, electronic surveillance, and, indeed, by the whole apparatus of corporate control that we now increasingly find ourselves (and our schools) caught in. In such a consumer society, perversely powered by the pathology of what Marx called “commodity fetishism,” the person falls out of living relationship with himself and, consequently, with other people and with his work. This is what Marx meant by alienation — from self, others, and labor. It is another term for living in bad faith. When the agencies that exercise power over individuals are able to convince them that this is the way things should be, thus seducing them to give more and more of themselves over to the corporate complex of control, then those individuals are said to be living in false consciousness.

Education that seduces children — with the bait of grades, status, and possessions — into uncritical conformity is education for false consciousness. They are thereby turned into objects, trained into false consciousness, alienated from themselves and others, and rewarded for losing the connection with their unique core selves.

This is education for neurosis, a pedagogy of psychosocial illness, and it is having tragically predictable results on our children, many of whom are increasingly being diagnosed with all sorts of “behavioral” and “learning” disorders. In a high percentage of these cases what we are really seeing is not evidence of children having “illnesses” but of them acting out against the illness of the classroom itself — the mind- and soul-numbing joylessness and anti-creativity of life in the standardized classroom today. And when the student’s quite natural rejection of the sterility of the classroom becomes too pronounced, he is diagnosed as being ill and drugged into submission with pharmaceuticals provided by the same corporate system that caused the problem in the first place.

Being-for-oneself, on the other hand, is the source of creativity, realistic compassion, and emotional empowerment. Education that promotes being-for-oneself is what is needed to promote a society filled with existentially clear and (therefore) psychologically, intellectually, and politically empowered people who can make a nation both great and good, for such fundamental individual empowerment is crucial not only to individual but also communal well-being. In 1988, the dean of American educational history, Lawrence Cremin, warned that the major specter that would haunt the United States in the 21st Century would be the metastasizing of the cancerous military-industrial complex into the “military-industrial-educational complex.” Our major challenge as educators, he predicted, would be to find ways to resist it. His prophecy has come to pass. As educators we must find ways to educate for existential authenticity in order to resist the incursion of the corporate behemoth into our educational spaces. Although a daunting task, it is a also a noble one, amounting to nothing less than keeping alive the vision of education as the emotional, intellectual, and ethical nurturance of students.

How a teacher goes about the business of fostering narratives of empowerment and hope in his students will often vary from class to class, even student to
student. However, in what follows I will discuss some of what I believe to be the most crucial features of what might be called teaching for transcendence and transformation: education as caring; education as art; education as liberation; education as encounter; and education as transcendence.

**Education as Caring: A Relational Pedagogy**

In his famous hierarchy of needs pyramid, Maslow placed at the very top what he considered to be the most important need of all: the desire to self-actualize. As a theorist and practitioner who was instrumental in the last half of the 20th Century in defining education as the enrichment of the student’s existential lifeworld, Maslow’s ideas are central in defining education for existential authenticity. “If we want to be helpers, counselors, teachers, guides, or psychotherapists,” said Maslow (1968, vi),

what we must do is to accept the person and help him learn what kind of person he is already. What is his style, what are his aptitudes, what is the person good for, not good for, what can we build upon, what are his good raw materials, his potentialities? ... Above all, we [should] care for the child, that is, enjoy him and his growth and his self-actualization.

In the existentially sensitive curriculum, the student is offered the “possibility for him as an existing person [to make] sense of his own life-world” (Greene 1974, 69-83). What he studies is grist for the mill as he interprets and carries on his life as truly to himself and as serviceably to others as he can.

Because this view of educational processes is so tightly focused on individual uniqueness, there are no one-size-fits-all pedagogical tools or methodologies that can create zones for self-actualization in the classroom. It is an attitude toward the student, not a program for her, which lies at the heart of existentially rich pedagogy. This attitude can best be described as one of caring. Caring means reverence for who the student is at her core, gratitude for the chance to help her expand her intellectual horizons, and excitement at seeing the student make an idea her own in her own way, and then fold it into her own life story in order to vitalize her existence.

A pedagogy of deep caring — existential caring — is not coddling. It is not the saccharine pedagogy of just making sure that students play “nice” and feel “good” about themselves at the end of the day because they were never particularly challenged to do anything difficult or to move out of their comfort zones. Rather, it sets the highest of all possible standards: that the student engage an activity or idea in the classroom as fully as she can, and always with an eye to enfolding what she has learned into her life story so that she is truer to herself and more genuine, and genuinely caring, with others. When this happens, then education goes beyond the mere training and memorizing that characterize standardized education; it ceases to be concerned with the mere transmission of facts and figures, an education that turns the individual into an object. Instead, it involves the transformation of self, other, and the world and helps a student in her ongoing project of becoming an ever deeper subject (Kane 1999).

**Education as Art: “Poetic” Knowing**

This feature of existentially constructive education has to do with the famous Kantian distinction between mathetic (analytical) and poetic (intuitive) knowing. In the existential domain, the premium is on poetic ways of knowing. This is the case whether the subject is clearly in the poetic domain, as in art, or clearly in the mathetic domain, as in physics. When a subject is handled poetically, it is used primarily as a springboard for a student to explore and expand his existence, and to then express this experience in words, actions, and products that betoken his growth. From making a cutting board in a woodshop class to experiencing the power of an image in a Shakespearian sonnet, from charting a chemical reaction in a lab to running the 100 meter hurdles, virtually any idea or activity at a school can be an occasion for a student to grasp her existence more vitally, intuit its possible directions more subtly, and act on all of this more lucidly. Global, intuitive, and idiosyncratic, this way of knowing is deeply poetic. It is in this sense that any activity — indeed, at their very best, activities that are engaged in to court surprise, to cultivate discovery, to find new forms of experi-
ence — is expressive in character. Nothing in the sciences, the home or mechanical arts, or in social relationships prohibits or diminishes the possibility of engaging in expressive outcomes. (Vallance 1991, 159-160)

Because this way of educating revolves around the uses of intuition and expression in the service of the care and cultivation of the individual, it is often called “humanist-aesthetic” (Ornstein & Hunkins 1988). Such pedagogies are also “aesthetic” because the goal is for the student to experience any topic or activity in the classroom as one would experience a work of art. Consider what happens when an art critic views a painting.

In looking at the painting, the idea is to approach the piece with as finely focused concentration as possible. Not taking anything for granted, she is always trying to see the piece with as much freshness of mind and clarity of judgment as possible. This means never taking anything for granted while engaging the painting but always being open to surprising new visions of what the painting is and what it suggests. When this happens, the painting reveals endless layers and types of meaning from viewing to viewing. The painting is not a static product. It is a living process: dynamic, open-ended, and varying from viewer to viewer. And of course, the confrontation with the piece of art becomes meaningful only when it casts light on the viewer’s own existence: its present state, its limitations and possibilities, its strengths and shortcomings, and, above all, its trajectory towards an ever more meaningful future.

When teachers and students engage a subject in this way, mining it together for its existential gold, then the curriculum is being experienced in an aesthetic manner. The curriculum becomes a living organism, not a dead object. And as both teacher and student enter into dialogue with each other through dialogue with the living curriculum, they, too, become more alive. Thus as the existentialist curriculum theorist Max van Manen (1982, 295) has wisely observed:

It is probably less correct to say that we learn *about* the subjects contained in the school curriculum than that the subjects let us know something. It is in this letting us know that subject matter becomes a true subject: a subject which makes relationship possible. The subject calls upon us in such a way that its otherness, its it-ness, turns into the dialogic Other: the “you.” In this way our responsiveness, our “listening” to the subject, constitutes the very essence of the relationship of a student with subject matter.

The philosopher of art Theodore Meyer Greene (1953, 414) said that

a work of art is a unique, individual whole — a self-contained artistic “organism” with a “life” and “reality” of its own.... The competent critic ... apprehends the individual work of art in all its self-contained uniqueness through sensitive artistic re-creation.

Similarly, the teacher must help the student “recreate” a subject (which, no less than a work of art, is also “a self-contained ‘organism’ with a ‘life’ and ‘reality’ of its own”) so that the student experientially makes it her own. To accomplish this, the teacher must move the student — sometimes tenderly, sometimes forcefully — beyond the easy, standard interpretations of the subject matter in order to confront the issues under discussion with the same intensity, curiosity, and creativity as in confronting a piece of art for the first time. The teacher, no less than the student, must come face-to-face with the subject matter with the same emotional clarity and moral courage that a good critic brings to a work of art.

**Education as Liberation:**

“Conscientizacion”

The existentially authentic curriculum rests on the idea that we are ethically obliged to construct ourselves not only individually but also collectively in ever greater degrees of humane and responsible freedom. Democracy is a political expression of the existential ideal of free individuals in mutually respectful, mutually enriching dialogue in the wider setting of a civic body. Perhaps the most important 20th-century educational prophet of this dual existential vision of personal and political freedom was the educational theorist Paolo Freire (2001, 27, 87):

Insofar as I am a conscious presence in the world, I cannot hope to escape my responsibility
for my action in the world…. At the heart of the experience of coherently democratic authority is a basic, almost obsessive dream: namely, to persuade or convince freedom of its vocation to autonomy as it travels the road of self-construction, using materials from within and without, but elaborated over and over again. It is within this autonomy, laboriously constructed, that freedom will gradually occupy those spaces previously inhabited by dependency.

This is Freire’s well-known pedagogical practice of conscientização, roughly translated as “becoming aware.” It means teaching for consciousness raising, both our own and our students’. Conscientización views the curriculum as an instrument of liberation in the classroom in the service of liberation of oneself and others in the larger world outside the classroom. Freire began his teaching and theorizing among the very poor in order to help them find personally meaningful ways to define and deal with their socioeconomic oppression (1970). As his theorizing evolved, he began to view oppression more broadly as any set of internal or external constraints that hinder an individual — regardless of her socioeconomic status — from being able to take hold of her existence and build it up in ways that manifest her best talents and ethical intuitions (2001). Education as conscientización sees the curriculum as a tool that the student can use to examine her life, expose those forces that are illegitimately constricting it, and devise ways of unfettering it so as to exist in greater scope, wisdom, and compassion.

The chains that the student wishes to shake off may be primarily political or economic; however, these are not the only chains that bind. A boy who is discovering himself as a ballet dancer in a dance class and is beginning to break free of his father’s brutish notions of masculinity is engaging in education as liberation. A girl who, in studying images of women in literature from other cultures, is learning how to reject the demeaning images of womanhood purveyed by American advertising, is also involved in education as liberation. And the teacher who is aiding her students in these ways is herself becoming freer and more empowered in rising to her full professional stature as a guide to her students. She becomes an example of how freedom is found, manifested, and exercised in intelligent goodness. Such a teacher, by her very presence, generates hope in his students, who now experience trust in the world because this [teacher] exists. That is the most inward achievement of the relation in education. Because this human being exists, meaninglessness, no matter how hard pressed you are by it, cannot be the real truth. Because this human being exists, in the darkness the light lies hidden, in fear salvation, and in the callousness of one’s fellow-men the great Love. (Buber 1965, 98)

**Education as Encounter:**

**The “I-Thou” Classroom**

All talk of existentially responsive education amounts to nothing if a student is not seen and treated respectfully in the classroom. A student cannot be treated as an anonymous object and be expected to develop as a responsible subject. The degree to which a teacher may engage each student individually will vary, of course, depending upon institutional guidelines, class size, resources, and the student’s own willingness to do so. But at any educational site that claims existential authenticity, there must be a basic attitude of what one might call existential regard for the student as a unique being, and this attitude must prevail in how teachers and students interact with each other. Where a student is treated as an object, no curriculum, however rich in existential potential, can really be existentially fruitful because, even though the teacher may talk the talk of helping students develop deeply, he is not walking the walk of authentic encounter with them.

Crucial to existentially fertile education is an I-Thou relationship between the teacher and student, not I-It. According to the Jewish existentialist theologian Martin Buber, an I-Thou relationship occurs in dialogue when individuals are intellectually sincere with and emotionally attuned to each other. The relationship, one of care-full listening and speaking, promotes each person’s existential journey. An I-It relationship, on the other hand, is deeply unethical, for in such a relationship one person is trying to turn the other into an object, an “it,” a mere instrument to serve his plans or programs with no regard for the other’s individual nature or needs. An I-It relation-
ship is destructive because the “I” in this dyad has no interest in exploring or empowering the other person as a unique “Thou” with great existential potential. Instead, the “I” of the I-it relationship, seeing the other person as an object of its own domineering desires and acquisitive goals, tries to negate the other’s existential identity in order to feed its own insatiable appetite and will. Yet, because we attain existential authenticity in ourselves only to the degree that we respond to it in others, we close the door on our own existential growth whenever we objectify another person in any fashion.

Buber saw the I-Thou relationship as both the origin and goal of any deeply educational situation, for ideally “the relation in education is one of pure dialogue.” The I-Thou relationship being the cornerstone of morality, Buber made what he called “dialogical ethics” the foundation of his pedagogy. In dialogical pedagogy, the relationship between the teacher and student is the nucleus around which everything else spins. The curriculum is the occasion for this relationship to happen. As a theologian, Buber even went so far as to claim that when a teacher and student are engaged in rich relationship, they reach not only intellectual but truly spiritual heights, coming into contact with Divinity, “the eternal Thou.” “The extended lines of relation meet in the eternal Thou,” wrote Buber (1965, 75) in his classic work I and Thou, and every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou; by means of every particular Thou, the primary word addresses the eternal Thou. Through the mediation of the Thou of all beings, fulfillment, and non-fulfillment, of relations comes to them: The inborn Thou is realized in each relation and consummated in none.

On the other hand, in an I-It pedagogy the teacher and student soon find themselves in an interpersonal and spiritual wasteland, for if a man lets it have the mastery, the continuing growing world of It overruns him and robs him of the reality of his own I, till the incubus over him and the ghost within him whisper to one another the confession of their non-salvation. (Buber 1965, 46)

Thus it is imperative that the existentially authentic teacher enter into a relationship with the student in increasingly deep encounter. The subject under analysis in the classroom is not a thing unto itself but rather the curricular infrastructure of this essentially ethical process of relationship in education. This is a process that rests upon subject matter but ultimately transcends it as the teacher and student, through dialogical encounter, approach the realm of meaning in their individual lifeworlds. Whatever sets itself up against relationship in education — and this is, of course, precisely what standardized forms of instruction and assessment by definition do — commits moral violence. It is also intellectually inadequate because the teacher and student will achieve the most profound forms of understanding of the subject matter by exploring it together.

In the I-Thou classroom, discourse must be honest, whether that honesty be comfortable or not to the members of a classroom; for, what is dishonest could hardly be considered ethical. To be sure, I-Thou conversation must always be civil. Uncivil discourse — such as abounds on radio and television talk shows, in which the object is not really to make a useful point but to skewer and even humiliate an opponent — never results in any ultimate good. How could it? Existentially authentic discourse is mindful of the ethical building up of oneself and others through (inter)penetrating encounter, not the public
shaming of others through merely slick verbal attacks. *I-Thou* discourse must, by definition, be civil.

However, it need not always be comfortable. Indeed, existentially authentic conversation will sometimes not be comfortable because each conversant may be being challenged to examine and even change deeply held convictions. Dishonest discourse designed to keep things superficially “friendly” in the classroom by timidly evading real differences in points of view and conclusions among the participants is (be it ever so “polite”) not authentic. Not being authentic, it is not constructive. Not being constructive, it is not truly care-full of oneself and others. It is, therefore, although sweet-seeming, not really *I-Thou* discourse but simply a polite version of unethical *I-It* talk.

Civil, frank, and characterized by genuine listening to others and humility in speaking one’s own truth, *I-Thou* classroom discourse is both open and humane. It is an approach to conversation in which the conversant is like the character in *The Canterbury Tales* of whom Chaucer wrote, “Gladly would he learn, and gladly teach.”

Healthy humor — not demeaning to anyone or any group of people in any way — can play a significant role in the creation of an *I-Thou* classroom. Laughter can humanize things, tempering the high drama of existentially authentic encounter with a well-timed chuckle. Just as the comic-relief scenes in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, or *Julius Caesar* give the audience a chance to breathe, relax, and reconstitute themselves for the next crucial existential encounter, so a good laugh in the classroom can be restorative, bonding, and clarifying.

Furthermore, a teacher must always be resisting the temptation to engage in “power talk” if he wishes to foster real communication (Huebner 1999). Power talk is any talk that is meant to illegitimately assert the teacher’s inherent power in the classroom in order to shut a student down. There are many varieties of power talk.

Often it consists of the teacher trying to run circles around students by whipping out obscure, unnecessarily technical, and arrogant language. For the student, such talk is disempowering and demeaning. Power talk is a sort of verbal web that a teacher maliciously spins in order to immobilize and then devour the student psychologically, politically, and morally. Power talk is also a steamroller that the teacher mounts in order to force his interpretation of something onto students who have not had the chance to explore it by feeling their way through it individually, poking inquisitively into its various corners and alleys, peaks and valleys, and thereby making it their own in their own way and for their own purposes. Such exploration is the only kind of classroom discourse that produces free individuals in *I-Thou* conversation. Indeed, “the natural educative consequences of conversation are broken when the power relations between speaker and listener are unequal and when power is used [by the teacher] to impose an interpretation” (Huebner 1999, 256).

In short, power talk in the classroom is unethical.

Besides being wrong, power talk is pedagogically useless because no one will truly accept an imposed interpretation, however much she may sycophantically feign agreement in the classroom in order to appease the teacher.

Not power talk but empowering talk should be the gold-standard in the existentially rich classroom.

**Education as Transcendence: The Sacred Space of the Classroom**

For some teachers and students, educational processes and products attain their greatest significance only when they point beyond themselves to a realm of spirit that transcends this world in every way — while investing itself in this world at every turn. For such individuals, education must ultimately revolve around this Spirit in order for education to have existential validity. Inviting, invoking, being with, and celebrating this Presence is their ultimate concern. For them, education is one of the primary ways of moving towards communion with and celebration of the Absolute Other, the Divine, which, although invisible and often enough incomprehensible to us,
gives visible life and meaning to everything we see. Since it is in the light of this Spirit that such individuals ultimately inhabit and interpret their lifeworlds, education that exists for the Spirit as it dwells uniquely in each of them is of the highest existential worth to them.

Education in the spirit is not typically “religious,” nor need it even be obviously “spiritual.” The only requirement is that it be an occasion for the individual, in his own quiet and particular way, to seek out the presence of the Divine that inheres in education. This can happen on a football field, in an art class, within a lab, in a discussion about literature, or on a theatrical stage. For as curricular theorist Duane Huebner, has declared, any educational content or relationship may be a dwelling place for the Divine. The Spirit, Huebner (1999) asserts, is inevitably present in existentially authentic education.

Hovering always is the absolute “other,” Spirit, that overwhelms us in moments of awe, terror, tragedy, beauty, and peace. Content is the “other.” Knowing is the process of being in relationship with that “other.” Knowledge is an abstraction from that process.

To define the goal of education in lesser terms is a mistake, for “the journey of the self is short circuited or derailed by those who define the ends of life and education in less than ultimate terms.” Huebner (1999, 360) notes in similar strains that

the otherness that informs and accompanies education is the absolute Otherness, the transcendent Other, however we name that which goes beyond appearances and all conditions. Education is the lure of the transcendent — that openness to a future that is beyond all futures.

When teaching and learning occur under the pull of that lure, when it is a trajectory towards the transcendent, education is in and for the Spirit.

The Divine may announce itself in the classroom all of a sudden. This is what happens in the story told by Martin Buber in his essay “On Teaching.” Here he portrays a young teacher entering a classroom full of unruly boys at the beginning of a term in geography. Understandably defensive, the teacher’s initial impulse is to assert his power in order to establish control — and just to say No, to say No to everything rising against him from beneath.... And if one starts from beneath one perhaps never arrives above, but everything comes down. But then his eyes meet a face which strikes him. It is not a beautiful face nor particularly intelligent; but it is a real face, or rather, the chaos preceding the cosmos of a real face. On it he reads a question which is something different from the general curiosity.... And he, the young teacher, addresses this face. He says nothing very ponderous or important, he puts an ordinary introductory question: “What did you talk about last in geography? The Dead Sea? Well, what about the Dead Sea?” But there was obviously something not quite usual in the question, for the answer he gets is not the ordinary schoolboy answer; the boy begins to tell a story. Some months earlier he had stayed for a few hours on the shores of the Dead Sea and it is of this he tells. He adds: “And everything looked to me as if it had been created a day before the rest of creation.” Quite unmistakably he had only in this moment made up his mind to talk about it. In the meantime his face has changed. It is no longer quite as chaotic as before. And the class has fallen silent. They all listen. The class, too, is no longer a chaos. Something has happened. The young teacher has started from above. (1985, 112-113)

Although such collective moments as these are not rare in the existentially vibrant classroom, neither are they the norm. More typically, the Spirit addresses the individual student and teacher in the classroom in silent, idiosyncratic, quite unpredictable ways throughout the day, alerting him that what he is experiencing in the classroom can be absorbed into the larger narrative of his life, holding out to him the promise of greater involvement in his own depths, where the Divine stirs him, meets him, and, in showing him how to be more like himself, makes him more like Itself. In the existentially vital curriculum, the student and teacher increasingly learn to attend to the classic Zen imperative, “Become who you are!”
In sum, the teacher has both the burden and the boon of being entrusted with a sacred work — that of fostering narratives of hope in his students, narratives that promote their transformation and transcendence. He does this by means of a caring pedagogy, rooted in genuine encounter with his students and oriented towards a celebration of their creative potential within the spaces that the curriculum provides. In this manner he truly becomes a mentor — one who fosters his students’ personal liberation and promotes their communion with ultimacy as they conceive it and live it out freely in their own lives and as their own lives.

References


Notes

1. I have drawn especially from the works of Jean Paul Sartre (1956), Martin Heidegger (1964), and Albert Camus (1970). Also important for this article has been the work of the religious existentialist writers Soren Kierkegaard (1969), Martin Buber (1965), and Paul Tillich (1975).