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"MISREADING" STUDENTS' JOURNALS FOR THEIR VIEWS OF SELF AND SOCIETY

In *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life,* Robert Bellah and his team of social scientists report the results of interviews they conducted with 200 middle-class Americans in order to determine what sense they made of their individual and collective lives. They asked such questions as "How ought we to live?" "How do we think about how to live?" "Who are we, as Americans?" and "What is our character?" They wanted to know "what resources Americans have for making sense of their lives, how they think about themselves and their society, and how their ideas relate to their actions (Bellah et al. vi–viii)." They conclude:

> While we focus on what people say, we are acutely aware that they often live in ways they cannot put into words. It is particularly here, in the tension between how we live and what our culture allows us to say, that we have found both some of our richest insights into the dilemmas our society faces and hope for the reappropriation of a common language in which those dilemmas can be discussed. (vii)

While reading *Habits of the Heart,* I wondered what responses my students would make to Bellah's questions. Would their language

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reveal a disparity between their lives and what they say about them, as the language of Bellah's subjects had? Because I assign a daily journal to students in my Freshman Composition class, I decided to encourage them to use their journals to explore their perceptions of self and society. I have my students write seven days a week all semester: twice a week, they write focused assignments for my class; two other days, they freewrite on another course they are taking; and the remaining three days they freewrite on subjects of their own choosing. For the two focused assignments they would write for my class, I would assign questions similar to Bellah's.

Before progressing very far with my experiment, I attended several sessions at the 1988 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in St. Louis on the interplay between social belief and language and was struck by the similarities between the premises of Bellah and colleagues and those of the poststructuralists, particularly Derrida. Both groups believe that language is, as Terry Eagleton says, a "much less stable affair than the classical structuralists had considered" (129), for the language with which we express our beliefs, indeed our beliefs themselves, often must give way in the face of experience that contradicts them. Both suggest that our language, as Eagleton expresses it, "may 'show' us something about the nature of meaning and significance which it is not able to formulate as a proposition" (134). And both are seeking new common languages with which we can verbalize the deepest aspects of our individual and communal lives in order to enrich ourselves and our society.[1]

In their state of flux, student journals epitomize the poststructuralist notion of the text in the perpetual state of becoming. Edward White, in an article in *College Composition and Communication* entitled "Post-Structural Literary Criticism and the Response to Student Writing," proposes that what good teachers do when they read their students' work is deconstruct it. He says:

> Once we accept the necessity of 'misreading,' as the post-structuralists use the term, we tend to be less sure of the objectivity of our reading and more ready to grant to the student possible intentions or insights not yet present on the page. . . . As teachers of writing, we seek in the texts our students produce that sense of original vision, that unique perception of new combinations of experience and ideas that Derrida tends to call 'différance.' (191)

While Wayne Pounds, one of the social rhetoricians who spoke in St. Louis, thinks intellectuals must create the new language that he and Bellah call for,[2] and Bellah is concerned with the utterances

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of the middle class, I would analyze the language of 18- to 23-year-old City University of New York community college freshmen neither educated intellectuals nor, for the most part, members of the economic middle class. My purpose, now more sharply defined, was both to "misread" (deconstruct) their journals in an attempt to learn what I could of their struggle to make sense of their lives and to encourage them to find language to express their experiences so that their language and their reality could more nearly coincide. What I discovered were some interesting oppositions, contradictions, and rich uses of language.

In addition to the free and focused journal entries that I had been assigning, I decided also to assign at the end of the semester entries that would encourage students to once again formulate their beliefs about self and society. In these latter entries, they would use what they had written in their journals to formulate these beliefs, rather than, as in their focused writing, to write "off the top of their heads." They would be developing what Kenneth Dowst has called an "epistemic" use of language: they would use their own language as expressed in their free and focused entries to "translate raw percepts into a coherent experience and transmute discrete experiences into more abstract sorts of knowledge" (69). In the poststructuralists' view, they would deconstruct their journals by locating those points at which discrete experiences (freewritings) and raw percepts (focused writings) contradicted each other or "undermine(d) each other in the process of textual meaning" (Eagleton 132). Hopefully, the experience of misreading their journals would help them in the end to search for a new language with which to embrace the disparities.

In analyzing their journal writings after the semester was over, I discovered that the majority of my students, when asked their views in focused entries, believe that they are individualists and that society is composed of individuals who believe in mutual sharing and responsibility. In comparing these focused writings with their freewriting and their focused and free assignments with the epistemic assignments, I asked myself these questions:

1. What do students say about individualism? To what extent do their daily thoughts and actions, as evidenced in their free journal entries, support their views? Does their faith in individualism appear to sustain them?
2. What do they say about society? What relationships do they have to society? How supportive do they find these relationships?
3. What do students who feel rewarded by their lives and their interactions with others say about them? What language do they use?

Below I include excerpts from the journals of seven students and the answers I think the entries suggest to my questions. First, to introduce the students and in the order in which their journal writings will appear: George is a 23-year-old Hispanic student who appears very mature and sophisticated; Michelle is a 20-year-old student who is on a student visa from Trinidad; she is of Indian descent. Earline is a Black 18-year-old from a middle class Queens family. A veteran, Amil is part Black and part White and wears dredlocks. Jack is an 18-year-old all-American boy in appearance and interests, and so is Scott, except that Scott, who is about 20, has been a cocaine addict. Diana was born in Yugoslavia, but her family emigrated to the United States when she was three; she is a glamorous, blonde 18-year-old.

First, on the question of individualism, here are George, Michelle, Earline, and Amil. George, the 23-year-old Hispanic, says in his epistemic entry:

> I think as far as I am concerned, I tend to be more of an individual. I've always stuck with which I thought was right, even if I was criticized by my friends, my family, and even strangers. I guess it's why I've always been a loner for most of my life. As I wrote in one of my journal entries, 'I've always been alone even when I was with someone.' I guess I feel like that because I've gotten used to it. It has become a part of my life, my character, and it's something I gain strength from.

George indicates that his actions, as described in his free entries, support his claim of strength:

> There was one instance I recall writing in my journal where I was faced with a dilemma, cutting a long-time friendship because of this person's attitude toward my personal life and my family's economic situation. I remember as I was writing it, I realized how stupid I was to have let it go on so far and decided he was really not a friend.

Michelle from Trinidad also describes herself as an individual:

> I have noticed that I investigate many situations and try to figure out the reasons for many of my actions, and I believe this is an independent attitude. I realise that I try to get my personal opinion and not let another person's opinion influence my own. It is very difficult to get an opinion that is entirely your own; regardless of the situation, there is almost always another factor that contributes to our reactions, feelings, thoughts.

In her epistemic writings, Michelle supports her effort to be independent:

> I saw some of my independence in my April 29 journal entry in which I discussed some of the pressures that have evolved due to my different culture and morals. I could see the fight within myself to be myself even though it meant varying from the crowd. At this point in time, I was pressured to go out with a guy with whom I was not interested. I saw my independence reflected in the way I decided to wait until I was ready to have an affair and not when society thought I was ready.

Earline, a young Black girl, also calls herself an individual:

> From reviewing my journal, I reflect a very independent image. I want people to know me for myself and not label me as Mr. and Mrs. Greene's daughter. I don't follow trends—no, wait, I do, but when it's first born I tend to have hatred for this trend. As it dies down and becomes old, it starts to appeal to me. . . . I just do what I feel. I've always been known to 'swim' for myself. I don't follow behind anyone. To me it shows insecurity.

Earline then reveals doubts about the value of her independence:

> I don't know, maybe I'm a little one-sided; everyone needs something and someone to believe in, to feel needed and wanted with their peers.

While Earline's free entries seem to substantiate her claim to individualism, she is obviously having difficulty reconciling the claims of self with the need for community.

Amil, the veteran of mixed racial parentage, also writes of his independence:

> There were many times I sat alone in this school deliberately excluding myself from others. To me I wanted to be alone, with no distraction from others. I think better that way. Society in this school puts rigid guidelines of what is cool, and what is not. To me, I would rather be myself: a dreamer.

Like Earline, Amil realizes that his experience often belies his beliefs:

> Even trying to alienate myself from society, I find myself being conscious of my appearance, the way I talk, and the way I present myself. In one of my journal entries, I was sitting in the cafeteria, and I wrote this down: 'I sit here by

the window staring at the blue sky. Friendship warms the air around me, but I am still cold. There is laughter in the air, but I stay silent'.

As for my second set of questions, What do my students say about society? What relationships do they have to others? How much benefit do they derive? Jack, who most resembles the fabled all-American boy, writes:

> I am very conscious of others in society. I know what's going on with family members and friends. I am definitely not an individualist, only on some occasions.

Jack immediately belies his belief in community by continuing:

> The content of all my journals is really about me. Sometimes a person or two would pop up in an entry. Like the time I had a fight because of a girl. . . . Almost all my entries are really about me and me keeping records of myself.

Diana, the golden Yugoslav, writes:

> People should not be inconsiderate towards each other; one ought to behave towards another in the same fashion that one desires people to treat them.

She almost immediately adds:

> I would consider my attitudes and behavior toward other people to be somewhat of a sadistic nature. I continuously wrote of my cruel manner towards my family, and my totally indifferent attitude towards it. I wrote of my boyfriends and the horrible ways in which I have treated them. The fact that really disturbs me is that I actually found pleasure in behaving in this unpleasant fashion.

Diana's diary supports her harsh judgment of herself in her relations to others. Of her family left behind in Yugoslavia, she says:

> All through the time that I've been gone, I never do forget their faces. They were all and still are very close to my heart, especially my grandma and now that I have gotten to know her better my heart is sick with grief for the difficult life that she has always had. Now I feel sad that I couldn't have been nicer to them this summer. I cannot help being a horrible person.

Diana's conclusion about herself in one entry indicates the little satisfaction she gets from her independence or her relationship with others:

I don't know what's wrong with me anymore. I am so unenthusiastic about everything. Everything and everyone is a bore to me. I don't show any zest or anything else for that matter. It is as though I do not have any feelings about anything. I am just drained of emotion.

To Scott, the former addict, society lies to the individual:

Society tells me that I should not feel hurt, that it's no big deal, that my feelings aren't valid.

He is concerned that society has taught him to lie also:

Sometimes when I write, I feel afraid to put myself on paper. I feel conscious of society and I 'color' whatever I write. I don't exactly lie but I don't tell the truth either. I just leave some things out. 'I asked this girl to dance. She said no. She didn't deserve me anyway.' In reality I felt rejected but for some reason when I wrote it, I hid my feelings.

He concludes:

Most of the time I reflect a self that is always conscious of others. That's how society is. Everything is very ideal. Everyone wants to be either normal or some sort of rebel. It's hard to live up to these roles. We become different on the outside. If we masquerade long enough we lose ourself and become someone or something else.

Although Scott apparently feels alienated from himself and society because of what he sees as society's condoning of dishonesty, he feels he has reached out and made an effort to make others honest. In one journal entry written after he shared an essay on his drug addiction, he writes:

The class read my paper today and a lot of people related to it. I think it hit home and made a lot of people get honest.

He concludes:

By being honest, I set an example for society. If enough people respect my honesty and they get honest and two of their friends get honest and two of their friends get honest
. . . .

While what is revealed about George's and Michelle's lives seems to corroborate their statements about themselves, the experiences of the other students seem to contradict what they say. What in their use of language can help explain the contradiction? It

is apparent that Earline, Amil, Jack, Diana, and Scott all speak primarily of themselves, even when talking about society, with overtones unlike those in the utterances of George and Michelle.

The authors of *Habits of the Heart* found egocentrism a characteristic of the language of most of their subjects. In fact, both they and Pounds call the first language of Americans the language of individualism. From its roots in the utilitarian language of Benjamin Franklin and the expressive language of Walt Whitman, Bellah says the language of individualism today is more nearly a managerial and therapeutic language. In the journals of Earline, Amil, Jack, Diana, and Scott we can hear the language of therapy, which Bellah and colleagues find "bereft of resonances that can fully describe the moral values that give individual and collective life meaning" (138).

Bellah posits a second common language, a language of community, founded on the biblical and republican languages of the 17th and 18th centuries and typified by the utterances of John Winthrop and Thomas Jefferson. They believe that by drawing on these moral and civic languages in our national discourse, we can help ourselves out of our impoverished national condition, an impoverishment that many of my students demonstrate. They do not advocate a return to traditional forms, which "would be to return to intolerable discrimination and oppression. The question, then, is whether the older civic and biblical traditions have the capacity to reformulate themselves while simultaneously remaining faithful to their own deepest insights" (144).

What are the features of this second language? Bellah describes it as a "language of tradition and commitment in communities of memory" (152–155). The community of memory necessary for the rebirth of this language, according to Bellah, must include long-term commitments that have helped articulate the self, virtues passed on and modeled, and a belief that solidarity based on responsibility is part of the good life (161–162). In the language in which George and Michelle talk about their relationship to society, the characteristic patterns of moral reasoning of this second language emerge.

George echoes Bellah's statement that "The rewarding private life is one of the preconditions for a healthy public life" (163):

> I think the role of an individual in a society is to be the best person he can be, both spiritually and productively. He or she should have a sense of accomplishment and a thirst for greatness in whatever is important to them.
>
> I think once you achieve your own happiness and satisfaction, then and only then will you be a productive member of society. I think it's very easy to understand: if

every individual in a society was the best person he or she can be then we can all be influenced by each other and thus making a stronger and more unified society.

Michelle's journal exemplifies the commitment to solidarity based on responsibility as part of the good life (that Bellah ascribes to the necessary second language):

> Society is made up of individuals who must work together to keep the society together. The fewer the number of individuals who contribute to society, the weaker the society becomes. Apart from personal and family situations, there is a responsibility of the individual to his society. Even though this may not be a law, the individual should realize that it is he who makes the society. He should face life as a challenge; and making society a better place should be his goal. If man does not help society, society cannot help itself. Without society, man cannot exist. . . .

Change usually comes from the young, and I suspect that the "new" language that Bellah, Pounds, and all Americans, even if inchoately, are seeking will come not from intellectuals or from older, middle-class Americans but from the young—our students. Because George and Michelle are not native-born Americans, it is also possible that, as has so often been the case in our history, this new language will come from immigrants, flush with an unfettered, unblemished American dream. The journal can provide students with an opportunity to work toward this new language by encouraging them to write of their lives without self-consciousness. By asking students to misread their journals, instructors can assist them to confront the oppositions with which we all live and perhaps to work toward a moral language that will begin to dissolve them. Perhaps some students, like George and Michelle, will reveal the original vision to which Derrida and Bellah believe the use of language can give rise.

I want to end with some of Michelle's free journal entries because in both the delight and despair with which she has confronted America, I believe we can see the value for her of her interplay with others. As she herself wrote in her epistemic entry:

> Journals are a way of discussing these factors without quite becoming aware of it. After rereading journal entries, we can see the influence and our interaction with society.

In her entry on not completing an assignment for my class, I think we also can see a keen moral mind at work. And in her

expression of her sheer joy in living, we encounter the originality of vision that Derrida calls "différance" and that Bellah and colleagues hope the American second languages of civic and moral responsibility can still evoke for a bereft society:

> When these people my own age came by, there I was playing with a bunch of little kids. After they all went, I felt a little relaxed; they all knew, so what the hell. I continued playing until Phillip threw me on the dirt. . . . All in all I had a good time. You see, back home I always played with kids and they loved it. 'Michelle always made the game more fun' they would say. I play with babies, five-year olds, teenagers, any age, and I feel comfortable too. Being here prohibits me from doing all I did at home. How I miss home.

> Since I came to New York I had the opportunity to see a variety of races and the interaction of these races. Coming from the West Indies I am considered black by some and East Indian by others since my ancestors are from India. I am very distraught by the interaction of blacks and whites. . . .

> Irresponsible and like a kid trying to avoid doing his homework, that's how I felt today in English class. Professor Stanley asked us if we read the work she had allotted for us; no one did. . . . She's right, of course, we should have done the work. It's just that I had been so busy that I had very little time. No, that's not true. If I found time to do all the other things I did, then I should have had the time to do my assignments. We always seem to make excuses for everything we do. People should learn to accept when they are wrong.

> The weather was actually in the 70s . . . I went off to the children's playground; in my bag I had books, a blanket, and an apple. I went to the benches and sat there just to relax. That's all I was going to do, relax in the sun. I took out my novel to read, but I didn't read much since I was caught by the movement of all the toddlers around me playing. They were at their age of discovery. Here they were fascinated by the control they had over themselves and the things they could do. I realized that there was nothing more beautiful than seeing little kids play.

Notes

[1] The several sessions at the 1988 Conference on College Composition

and Communication in St. Louis that were based on or referred to poststructualism sent me back to Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* for a refresher. I draw on only one Conference presentation here: Wayne Pounds' "The Shape of Social Rhetoric," in which he discussed the need for a third language, in addition to the languages of individualism and poststructuralism, a language "capable of struggling for legitimacy against the language of individualism." For Pounds, this language would draw on socialist theory, not on Bellah's republican and biblical languages. In fact, he explicitly takes issue with Bellah and colleagues for what he perceives to be an emptiness in their concept of community.

[2] See above.

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