

STORIES FROM AN UNORTHODOX CLASSROOM
SPOKEN
BY
NEWTON HARRISON

Tape 1:

I have been asked if I would speak about my experiences with several groups of children in the Lower East side of New York that I taught and work with. The suggestion was made to me by Petra Kruse, with whom I and my wife and collaborator, Helen, had been doing a work entitled, "The Endangered Meadows of Europe" working at the Kunst-und Ausstellungshalle, that's the Art and Exhibition Hall in Bonn, Germany. She had heard some of the stories of these experiences and proposed to me that these stories might be of use to you ("you" being a high-school teacher's conference). It was certainly of use to me, re-remembering the power of improvisation in new and stressful situations that require quick responses. Retrospectively, I perceive these events in my own life as adventures of a sort and also as instructive to me as an artist as anything I have ever done.

We were living on the Lower East Side of New York. The Polish gangs operated on one street, the Jewish community people operated on another, the Mafia owned the local candy store and the blacks were moving in two blocks away and into our building. Some buildings were being torn down and as artists, we and many others, moved into the East Village, as we could afford the loft spaces there.

Our children ended up playing on the streets and we noticed that while our children could come home when they had to go to the bathroom, many of their friends on the street could not. These were, we found out later, called, "latch key kids". They were locked out of their houses during the day (so they would not damage the interior of their houses) by their parents who either went out to work, to play or to do mayhem in the environment. So strange children came into our house to play and to use the bathroom. They were grateful. They were nice kids, more or less. But we were overwhelmed. One bathroom could not serve the neighborhood. So I, as an artist, began to look for places that did serve these children and found, in New York, that there was a whole settlement house system. The settlement house system was based on buildings and special rooms that charities, often religious charities, sometimes secular charities, formed to help poor people, down and out people, and in general to add vitality to a neighborhood. So I found a famous settlement house, named the Henry Street settlement, run by some people named Tefferteller and I said that I wanted to teach art for nothing. They said, "Come on! Nothing was a good deal." So I went in and began to teach these children how to paint. There were perhaps twenty of them. There were desks. There were some nice art supplies. There was a wall to paint on and there was kind of an aura of staidness, or quietness, or quiet control in the room that didn't work too well for the teaching of art and I noticed that the most interesting of children would slip away after about fifteen or twenty minutes. This wasn't too good for my ego, to tell you the truth, to see the best kids leave after twenty minutes. So I decided that I too would leave after twenty minutes and follow them. And I followed them to the basement of an Episcopalian church named St. Augustine's Chapel. And in their basement, which was approximately 500-600 square meters, perhaps 5000 square feet, with a stage at the end, there were perhaps a hundred kids, maybe a hundred and fifty. The voice level was high. The energy level was incredible. Six or seven games were going on simultaneously. There were two young Episcopal lay priests, teaching them something - I could not tell what. One was a man and one was a woman. One was named Carley and one was named Hugh. So I said to them "I wouldn't mind teaching art here if you could use an extra hand.". Then they asked how much I would cost and I said nothing and they said that was a good deal. Then I said but the issue here was that I wanted absolutely high quality paints and brushes. If they

could supply that they could have me. So they did. Then I required some other things. One was that the stage at the end of the room would be my studio, the walls on the stage would be the gallery, there would be fifteen smocks or little blue coats and when those little blue coats were filled with people that's all I could work with. So I set up shop and fifteen kids showed up.

Now understand who the population was. These children were between six and perhaps twelve or thirteen. Many were latch-key kids. Their parents and older brothers and sisters were in the gangs already. Some lived more or less OK lives. Some were brutalized. This was the sort of milieu of the Lower East Side in the early 60s. Maybe late 60s. And this was the population who came to work with me. And I noticed that of these fifteen children who took up the smocks there were odd groups. There were Puerto Ricans, there were blacks and whites. They would often come in with brothers or sisters. So I would find straight away that three people would be working on one painting - a nine year old, a seven year old and a five year old. And they would apportion out the tasks and the nine year old would tell the five year old what to do. I had never taught under these circumstances. I wasn't sure what to do. So I made a first decision. I put my own week's work up on the wall. Mostly it was drawing. Mostly it was abstract. Mostly it was about pattern. Mostly it was about bright colors and it was out of the milieu of that time. And when a child did a good work...(I didn't see them as children, I saw them and treated them as young artists.) ... and when I saw good work I would put that work up on the wall and pull one of mine down. The first time I did this was totally electric. The child, the young one who saw me do it, put his work up, suddenly had a level of affirmation before his eyes that he had never had before. And so pretty soon there was competition amongst them all to see how well they could paint, to see how fast they could get my work off the wall and their work up on the wall and there was a sort of joyous atmosphere.

So, I derived something from this. I was obviously involved, they were involved. And that being involved required evidence. My own work, on and off the wall, was the evidence of my own efforts and their efforts.

I knew I was on the right track because one day the lights went off. There was pandemonium in the whole room - shouting and screaming and laughing. It wasn't violent pandemonium. It was sort of playful. But when the lights went on again I noticed that my fourteen young students all had their brushes held over their paintings, and they had become still when the lights when the lights went off and were not going to hurt their work by making any move at all. Then I knew I was teaching. So, this group taught me many things, some of which I would like to share with you, some of which, of course, are unshareable.

I recall walking over to a group of three Puerto Rican kids, aged about eleven, maybe nine and maybe six. And the oldest one was named Annie, Anna-Maria, and they were painting a house, and I noticed that the window was not quite centered. So I said to them, in my normal art critical way, "Why don't you move the window over? It would look better." Three sets of eyes look at me as if a madman was talking to them. And three heads turned back and forth. "No!" There was no way they were going to move that window. I said "Why aren't you going to move the window?" And they said "Don't you know that Maggie, the witch woman, lives in that window? Don't you know that when we pass her door we have to walk sideways and make no noise? And was I going to propose endangering the their lives and their family by moving Maggie's window?" So I said "No. Of course not. My mistake. I apologize." And they went on painting. What I learned from this was formidable. It told me that everybody, myself included, although I hadn't realized it at the time, had a story running in his or her own head and the story was the event structure of his or her life. Indeed, every painting and every work of art had this as an element in it. These kids, Anna-Maria and her younger sisters and brothers, taught me this in a moment. Thereafter, when I taught, I always asked "What's the story here?" before I suggested anything about what to do. So I suggest to all who would listen to consider the narrativity in any work anybody does for any reason. And even now, many

years later, some of my most effective teaching of graduate students begins with helping them find the stories in even their most abstract work.

However, this was by no means the end of what I was taught by these kids. For instance, the course got a bit popular and there were fights over who was going to get the smocks. And therefore I had to come early and be a referee. One day, while teaching, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a girl, one of the larger girls in the class, maybe twelve, pick up some paint to throw across the room. Someone across the room had made an obscene gesture to her and she was getting normal revenge. However I had the automatic response that one does not throw paint, even for revenge, so I reached out to grab her shoulder, but instead I grabbed something that didn't feel like a shoulder at all. It was much too big and much too soft, and I thought to myself "How am I going to get out of this?" Of course I let go and I turned to her saying, "No throwing paint in the class. If you want to worry about revenge, worry about it after class." So she said, "OK Newt" and went back to painting. But the issue here is that if you are going to be engaged, you must improvise fully and take your chances.

Finally, we took the paintings, the best of them, the smallest of them, mounted them, framed them and took them out on the street and sold them at ten to twenty five cents each in the place where the street peddlers were. It was the first time that any of these kids had ever made money out of their own efforts! It was a marvelous moment. We all had a party and I went home and became an artist again, in the normal way, and they went home to whatever homes they went to. Two, I recall, got scholarships into private schools because their art making was, in truth, original and strong.

Somehow news had spread that I was a very unorthodox teacher, that I had unusual approaches to the process of teaching art. Moreover, I was in fact successful and success brings its own reward. In this case it was a terrifying reward. I was called into the office of the settlement house across the street. They had been sorry to lose me but happy at what I had done at St. Augustine's Chapel. In the office of the Henry Street settlement sat four people; the Director, a social worker, a psychiatrist and a nurse. They asked if I would be willing to teach another class, a very special class, a class of about twelve young people, ranging from about ten to fourteen, who were manifestly disturbed. Some had encountered violence, some had been locked in closets, one had heard his mother murdered, many had been sexually abused, one was already diagnosed as a full-scale manic depressive, another as a sociopath, another as paranoid, and so on. They said they would even pay me to do this. So I accepted. They said that these thirteen young ones were on their way to being institutionalized for life, at Bellevue, which was the scariest institution in New York City. They had been selected because it was thought there might be some hope for them. A team was being put together and I was to be the artist on the team.

Nothing had prepared me for the events which would take place. Of course I demanded large paper, both white and brown wrapping paper, fairly heavy weight large rolls, each one meter long. That meant I could make collective murals by putting a 4 meter length of white paper down and then add another and taping them together. I could pin the paper to the wall and have a two meter by 4 meter white surface to paint on. I had the notion that I would try to paint, or set up the painting of collective murals in some way. I had the intuition that some form of group behavior would be OK for these kids, maybe even good. Again I demanded a large array of good brushes of different sizes, powdered pigments of very good quality, and a plastic that I used, that you would know as the mixer for plastic paints - in America it is known as Liquitex. In the former class I had always set up the week's work by unrolling and cutting paper and by mixing the paints, so that we, as a group, would make the colors that they would paint with later. I added after that pastels and charcoal so that paint wasn't the only material to work with. Also I had set up conditions for cutting things out (blunt ended scissors) and collage. I was introduced to the class as Mr. Harrison, which was new to me, and twelve pairs of very suspicious eyes

looked at me. One boy looked at me for a split second and put his head down and went to sleep.

The social worker who had introduced me so unimaginatively then turned right around and walked out. It was not the best of beginnings. After I re-introduced myself I said "We're all going to mix paint. Then we're going to set up murals. Then we're going to paint, and we'll see if we can't make artists out of you." I said "I'm an artist. I'm going to put my work up on the wall and when one of you does a work as good, or better, or interesting in its own way, my work comes down and your work goes up." This didn't interest them very much either. The next thing I did was to cut the paper and make a large white area two meters by six meters and give them a demonstration of how to mix the paints and I said that we would all paint together on this and then perhaps each person's painting would be cut out of the mural, so, to begin with, each person would be given a white area. All were given paint brushes, all were given access to color. I gave a demonstration and we began, most of them reluctantly. I knew I was in trouble here when I noticed that one boy, I guess he was twelve, named Nelson was walking away from the mural with a pot of paint in his hands and his back to me and most everybody else was laughing. I walked over and I said "What are you doing, Nelson?" When I walked in front of him there he was, urinating into the cadmium yellow. I was astonished and said "Nelson, why are you pissing in the cadmium yellow?" and he said "It's the same color." And I said "No, it's not the same color. The cadmium yellow is bright yellow and your pee is much more like Naples yellow. Now cut it out and give me the pot." Nelson said he would throw the paint at me if I tried to take it away. In retrospect I recognized that this was one of those critical moments. At the time I don't think I realized how critical - I just acted. I grabbed the paint from Nelson. Nelson hit me. Then he hit me again. Fortunately I had been on the wrestling team while in high school and I immediately put him in a full Nelson and he began to kick me. I sat down with him and immobilized him in a split scissors. He screamed at the rest of the group, "If you don't throw paint at Mr. Harrison now, I'm going to get you after class." I then said in a louder voice, "If you throw paint at me now, you can see what I'm doing to Nelson, it will be far worse for you now, so choose Nelson after class or me now." There was this dead silence, and I said "Move back to the board and paint." Which they did. Then I said, "Now Nelson, if you won't piss in the cadmium yellow any more you can go and paint too." He said "OK" and began to paint. Meanwhile, at the door four people appeared, the Director, the social worker, the nurse and the psychiatrist. I looked up and said "What are you doing at my door?" "They said "You're not allowed to treat the children that way." And I said "I just did. Please go away." All the boys in the class looked at them and said "Yes. Go away." I understood at that moment something magical had happened. We were engaged. We had a common experience and we could move forward.

I do not recommend what I just described, as a practice. However, it was an example of risk taking and improvisation. We artists were taught in our training in the early 50's and 60's to take risks and given problems that encouraged taking chances. In truth, a painting or a piece of sculpture was seen as a field which was a metaphor for life. The risks you took on the surface of your paintings were reflections of your ability to improvise, your ability to see color anew, your ability to take chances with what was previously thought as immutable or untouchable. More over, in the more performative arts, the forbidden, the taboo, was being seen as fit subject matter for art. Your artist, Joseph Beuys, knew this well. When the American, Jackson Pollock, did his paintings, which were really drip paintings of a sort, he was constructing large color fields which were based on the relationship between chance and gesture. The central image disappeared. Pollock risked his whole career, his livelihood as it were, on this process, dropping the central image out of painting - an unheard-of thing. Pollock was often used, as an example of taking risks. What I had done, as I reflected backward in that classroom with Nelson, was to spontaneously take a large risk. The group could have started throwing paint at me, they could have said, "What you're doing to Nelson is not half as bad as what Nelson will do to us". So it is in this sense that I don't advise you to include this manner of physicality in any system of teaching that you will ever use, or I would ever use again deliberately.

However, unless I as a teacher, behave in a way that is fearless, sometimes playful, sometimes self-questioning, sometimes demanding of improvisation even with the poorest tools, for me good teaching has not taken place. In fact, as an artist I have found that if I do these things good art takes place. And so for me, in a sense, good art and good teaching became metaphors for each other.

Tape 2

In fact, I find that the act of teaching is rejuvenative and challenging. No one can ask a more basic question than a student who has a fundamental curiosity and is unafraid to require a definition of the obvious, which often turns out not to be obvious.

However, to return to this amazing group of boys. In the first weeks, we painted, and we made collages, and we made collective collages. We made individual works and each student built a body of work. I insisted that each person in this class, for me they were students, (they weren't just "emotionally sick, disturbed young people headed for Bellevue") produce a body of work and after producing twenty or thirty drawings, paintings and collages, we would look at the pieces done by each person and it became clear that the thirty pieces done by David were quite different from the thirty pieces done by Nelson, which in turn were quite different from the few pieces done by Willy. More of Willy in a moment. I was trying to get them to understand that each person was singular, everyone did in fact express ideas that were unique to himself and each one could in fact put up a one person exhibition all by himself. This was quite stunning for many, though not for all. The one person for whom it was not so meaningful was a young boy named Willy. He sat there. He was quiet. He almost never spoke. He sometimes was amused. He painted small works rarely. I liked Willy a lot for the wrong reasons. I liked him because he didn't cause me any trouble. Later, I came to understand that whoever caused me no trouble was perhaps the most troubled, was perhaps the person I should be paying the most attention to. Nonetheless, the group became vibrant and after about a month we had a meeting, and the social worker and the psychiatrist and the nurse, and the Director of the Settlement House, Dr. Tefferteller all agreed that I was somehow successful but nobody knew how and could I teach them my methodology. I said I doubted it because I was my methodology and nobody else was me. They went back to work with these young people. They had all become people to me.

One day, two months into this extraordinary experience, it was deemed that eight of this group were well enough so that they were surely not going to get into any bad trouble, and I could take them to Central Park. Of the remaining four in the class, three were being tested in some manner and the fourth, David, was the most overtly upset of the group. David could literally project his sense of anger and betrayal while sitting quietly and talking to himself. The others both accepted him and ignored him. I was relieved not to take David on this outing as I felt that he could at any moment explode into irrational activity.

The day was bright and sunny. The trip to the park uneventful. The boys full of anticipation. Most of them had only seen street trees, not too many of them and those were sickly. So, when we got to the great Central Park of New York City, the eight whom I was taking with me in a bus became excited to a degree I couldn't believe. There was an elaborate discourse on how there could be so much green and so few people, and so many happy people and how everybody could play on these green fields. And then why couldn't they, and could we come with a ball, and could we come with a bat, could we play baseball and could we play football? and on and on. They hadn't ever seen a happy place. We wandered around. We wandered through part of the Central Park Zoo. Again, astonishment. Large live animals had not been seen before save on occasional television. We wandered some more. They stayed together. They were a group. I bought them all hot dogs. Suddenly, Willy disappeared. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him running. I sent everybody after him. I suddenly remembered that Willy's case history said he was a manic depressive, and I had only seen his depressed state. The Park had evoked a manic state. And so Willy was running great circles around the Park and seven determined

young artists were chasing after him. Finally, they caught Willy and brought him back. I knew it was time to go home. As I started to head for where our bus was parked, I saw a group of horses and carriages across the street, driven by men in servant's black. People took old fashioned carriage rides in them through the park.

A great light appeared in Willy's eyes, and he broke away and ran over to a horse and he looked up at the horse and said "What is this great big thing?" He grabbed the horse's penis and he yanked it. And the horse jumped up and down and the driver couldn't believe that a boy was doing this to his horse. So he took his whip and got ready to hit him. I ran over, captured Willy again and held back the driver from striking him. Then we all went off into the green to talk this over. I said, "Willy, you can't do that." And he said, "OK". I said "Willy you're a bad boy!" And he said, "You're right." I said, "Willy, I don't know what to do with you." I was so upset, and so unnerved by all this that I just turned him over my knee and spanked him lightly in a symbolic gesture. Suddenly, a truck stopped. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a couple of black men moving angrily towards me demanding to know why a big white guy was hitting a little black kid. My whole group gathered round me and said "He deserved it. He was grabbing the horse's cock." And Willy looked up and said "Yeah, I deserved it. I was grabbing the horse's cock." The two truck drivers had never encountered any circumstances like these. They got back in their truck and drove away and we went back to the Henry Street Settlement House.

Another day, I was out walking with the group and Nelson, he who had peed in the cad yellow, picked up a rock. So I said "Nelson, what are you going to do with this rock?" It was a substantial rock. He said "I'm going to break one of those windows in the school." I said "Nelson, why are you going to do this?" "Why shouldn't I do this?" he said, threw the rock and broke the window. I understood then that Nelson honestly had something missing. Nelson truly didn't know why he should not break a window if that's what he desired to do. He couldn't edit himself, he couldn't self-reflect in this manner. I understood that I was probably looking at what was either sociopathic or psychopathic behavior in the boy, who was smart and whom I liked. Could one handle it? Could it be made to go away? The answer turned out to be yes, but not altogether.

Finally it became the time for the end of the term and each person had a body of work, and we had a criticism session, when each person's best five works were framed. Again we went out on the streets among the peddlers and peddled these works at 50 cents to a dollar apiece. Everyone made a few dollars. No one could believe it. This was their first act of successful socialized work, paid for and appreciated, in the real culture of everyday. They had become successes in their own eyes.

Discussion was had. It was agreed that each person would keep half his profits. The other half would go into a common pot for a big party. The common pot would then be matched by me and then that was to become the new common pot which would be matched by the rest of the psychological team, who were by this time in some awe of the processes these kids had gone through, because their examinations showed that whatever they were doing with the boys, which I did not know, and whatever I was doing with the boys, which they did not understand, eleven of the thirteen of these young people could now be moved into foster homes or back to their own homes, and would not have to be institutionalized. The other two would probably still need institutional life of some kind.

These are my stories. As an artist, of course, I am a story teller. I am not an analyst. I am not a therapist. I am not a normal teacher in these circumstances that you are in. I hope that what I have to say is of some value to you.