BOOK REVIEW

Speak, Hands

by Lillian Moats
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Seeking Educational Insights from Autobiographical and Artistic Sources:
Reflecting on *Speak, Hands* as an Educational Text

by William H. Schubert

Too often we search for educational insights in the likely places—books with *education* or *school* in the title or table of contents. Often such sources are, indeed, helpful. Increasingly, however, I have also explored a broader array of literature for courses I teach on education and curriculum theory. My students and I have been invigorated by Antoine Saint Exupery's *The Little Prince* for its empathy with children; Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* for insight into African American experience; Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and *A Tale of Two Cities* for hope in the possibility of human transformation toward greater goodness; John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* for hopelessness in poverty; Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* for understanding quest beyond monetary fortune; Feodor Dostoevski's "Grand Inquisitor" section of *The Brothers Karamazov* to perceive the decadent descent from compassion to power-hungry greed in bureaucratic systems; Franz Kafka's *The Castle* for portrayal of the absurdity in complex institutions; and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* for a glimpse of the fluidity that connects us.

These and other works of literature can be treated as educational literature, even if they do not claim to be so. Perhaps it is akin to the lyric in the old spiritual *All God's Children*, "Everybody talking 'bout heaven ain't goin' there." A valid message derived from this caveat may be to wonder whether speaking too assertively about education can sometimes undermine the effort. We may do well to search for educational insights in unexpected places, as exemplified in *Reflections from the Heart of Educational Inquiry* (Willis and Schubert 2000), wherein some thirty educators autobiographically reflect on ways in which a range of art forms (from novels to operas, paintings to sculpture, theater to poetry to music and culinary arts) have dramatically influenced their theory and practice of curriculum and teaching.

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Speak, Hands by Lillian Moats (2006) is one such place in which I have found considerable educational insight. An autobiographical narrative inquiry, the book is about education in the deepest and most worthwhile sense. Building on her earlier

Legacy of Shadows (1999), a work in which Moats revealed in poetic prose the struggle to understand the source of her emotional illness, *Speak, Hands* lyrically portrays Moats's journey of healing through self-understanding. Unfortunately, today's pressures to raise test scores and meet standards are so intense that educators are in danger of forgetting the central purpose of self-understanding in education. Nevertheless, it is imperative that we not forget this ultimate goal. What benefit would derive from all the skills and knowledge we purvey if we neglect to inspire self-understanding and the sense of direction that is derived from it? William Pinar and Madeleine Grumet (1976) admonished educators to focus on the verb form they called *currere*, rather than the prevailing noun *curriculum*, which connotes a thing to be disseminated. *Currere* is the infinitive form, to theorize about one's life, that they depict as follows:

> The first step of the method of *currere* is regressive, the free associative remembrance of the past. We work to excavate the present by focusing on the past, work to get underneath my everyday interpretation of what I experience and enter experience more deeply. The next step, the progressive, asks me to ponder meditatively the future, in order to uncover my aspiration, in order to ascertain where I am moving. Third, I analyze what I uncover in the first two sections, an analysis devoted to intuitive comprehension as well as cognitive codification. I work to get a handle on what I've been and what I imagine myself to be, so I can wield this information, rather than it wielding me. The beginning of agency. Now the antithesis, the synthetical stage. More deeply, now, in the present, I choose what of it to honor, what of it to let go. I choose again who it is I aspire to be, how I wish my life history to read. I determine my social commitments; I devise my strategies: whom to work with, for what, how. (p. ix)

John Dewey (1916, p. 76) said something strikingly similar six decades earlier, as his definition of education:

> It is that reconstruction and reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.

Dewey also argued that work with one's hands is more than the mundane preparation for a trade, asserting:

> The educative value of manual activities . . . depends upon the extent in which they aid in bringing about a sensing of *meaning*. . . . In effect . . . they are dramatizations. (Dewey 1916, p. 237)

Speak, Hands is an autobiographical book (Grumet 1988; Graham 1991), and it is arts-based narrative (Barone 2000; Eisner 1991), two recently accepted forms of educational research, although Moats's work was not intended as educational research at

all; it was likely intended to be a rendering of a personal journey of psychological healing, and that it is, too. Yet is psychological healing not also self-understanding? Metaphorically, is re-experiencing one's personal *journey* not *currere*, since the literal root of *curriculum* is the journey of a chariot race? In any case, the journey on which Lillian Moats takes the reader is one of healing through embodied understanding. Embodied understanding has been discussed extensively in feminist literature (Belenky, et al. 1986; Grumet 1988). Likewise, Mark Johnson (1987) has built on Dewey's resolution of the mind-body dualism to synthesize this unnatural bifurcation in the phrases captured by his title, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason.*

A painter, animator, filmmaker, weaver, librettist, and former kindergarten teacher, Moats sought healing and self-understanding through years of psychotherapy. In *Speak, Hands*, she relates an attempt to combine her Western therapy with Eastern approaches, including the astounding experience of having her hands levitate during meditation: through metaphorical gestures, her hands seemed to express independent insight, bringing memories from places her consciousness could not reach. Careful journaling of the wisdom of her hands, an artist's hands, enhanced the self-understanding Moats derived from interactions with her therapist, her family, and especially her loving friend and artistic partner, Jean-Paul. After dramatic recognition of Lillian's healing process through observing her hands in meditative levitation, Jean-Paul captured the essence of their epiphany:

> Your terror was based on guilt—just like mine. But your ballet of hands has given me a sense of wholeness and peace, as much as it has to you. (p. 136)

Poetically written and beautifully designed (in collaboration with her artist son), varieties of print and format styles make vivid and compelling the conversational insights of Moats's hands, her inner world, and her external dialogue with others. That makes me wonder how the hands or other dimensions of the human body could be pathways to self-understanding in educational experience. Did Moats's hands speak to her because they carry the sophistication of an artist's perception and adeptness? If we would attend more fully to the creative strengths of those we educate, might we locate domains of embodied understanding that bespeak special capacities which could lead them to greater wellness and awareness?

An especially creative image devised by Moats is an entity of self-understanding she calls the *Hidden Chronicler.* Whether it is a literary device, a philosophical construct, or an empirical discovery is interesting to ponder, but the result of pondering does not diminish the benefit of the Chronicler. For instance, her Chronicler says of Lillian, at one point:

> She is contemplating something far more vast than my life's work, as the voice of narrative memory. She is feeling dwarfed by this vastness, yet integral to it. She is grasping how innate is the creativity of the human spirit, in its will to survive. (p. 119)

Moats's Hidden Chronicler invokes a kind of ethnographer that can illuminate the self, bringing understanding that liberates imagination and creates possibilities for both oneself and one's contribution to goodness and justice in the world. Contemplating the next phases of her artistic work, Moats concludes, "From reworking my past, my hands turn to rehearsing my future" (p. 140). Perhaps by analogy to her experience of mind embodied, she speaks about increased awareness of a larger connection with the ground of being, saying, "I've come to think of this emotional state as *simultaneity*. In it, I partake of a sense of the *All* at once. . . . And it evokes the broader issue of the Individual in relation to the All" (p. 149). This continuing heuristic clearly is a strong illustration of *currere* in lived experience. Moats continues, in conclusion, as a new beginning:

> In stillness and silence, we are creatures watching ourselves—in tune with both what it is to be, and what it is to be ourselves. . . . I've come to feel that our sense of wholeness and humanity is somehow diminished when we do not work with our hands. (p. 150)

While *Speak, Hands* (and *Legacy of Shadows* before it) would be invaluable to those who seek healing, it offers great worth to anyone who wishes to deepen self-understanding, or to help others do so. How far back or forward our embodied understanding (particularly our hands) or our Chronicler could take us is unknown, but the creative case made by Lillian Moats' life should be read and pondered by those in education or other professions who strive to enhance self-understanding. This, of course, includes anyone who takes seriously the opportunity to engage in self-education.

From her inward communication with hands and Chronicler, who together helped her grow and heal through internal sharing of narrative, Moats concludes by analogy that the sharing of stories holds possibility for a larger image of human understanding:

> Can it be any different for the whole of humanity? Where does ignorant suspicion of one another lead us, if not toward madness and disintegration? . . . We must listen to each other's stories, for they are our own—our connection to the whole. . . . There will be no enemy within if we learn to listen to one another's stories. (pp. 152–153)

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