**Translation from the original text**

MANTEGAZZA R., *Pedagogia dell'accompagnamento educativo*,

in «Note di pastorale giovanile» 4 (2019) – 8 (2020)

**ENGLISH**

# THE PEDAGOGY OF EDUCATIONAL ACCOMPANIMENT

**COLUMNS**

# THE PEDAGOGY OF EDUCATIONAL ACCOMPANIMENT

*Raffaele Mantegazza*


1. **Like Sherpas: what it means to accompany**
2. **Eyes on the compass. The characteristics of the guide**
3. **Light backpacks. The characteristics of those who allow themselves to be accompanied**
4. **The rope team. The community of those who accompany**
5. **Maps: how (not) to get lost along the way**
6. **The wall and the refuge: between struggle and confirmation**
7. **False guides: the charm of those who lead us to evil**
8. **Paved roads: the temptation of the easy path**
9. **Beyond the summit**

## 1. Like Sherpas: what it means to accompany

*Silent, alone, without company*
*we went one before and the other after,*
*like Friars Minor on their way.*
Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Inferno XXIII, 1–3

What does it mean to accompany a child or an adolescent spiritually and educationally?

We know that the word *accompany* derives from the Latin *cum panis*: a companion is someone who shares bread with me — who eats my bread or whose bread I eat, until the words "mine" and "his" lose their meaning. One cannot help thinking of the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, where it is precisely the breaking of the bread that transforms the unknown pilgrim from a casual fellow traveler into a true spiritual companion — one whose presence the disciples, now conscious of themselves as such, have just asked to prolong:

> "And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him." (Lk 24:30–31)

To accompany means to become companions, to break bread together, to recognize one another — and in doing so, to rediscover each other along the road we freely choose to travel together.

Sharing bread also evokes the joy of stopping during a journey, when everyone is tired and each person contributes what they have to the group:

> "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?" (Jn 6:9)

To accompany means to share, to build community, to generate a new way of living together:

> "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need." (Acts 2:44–45)

The educational relationship is always a face-to-face relationship — an "I" and a "you" — but it is never merely individual; it is always communal. In accompanying a student, one accompanies a world — and accompanies oneself within that world. There is no educational relationship that can be conceived on Robinson Crusoe's island, because even Robinson was not alone; he carried within himself relationships of memory, recollection, and expectation that concerned him even from afar. This is the mystery of educational accompaniment: I bring you — you yourself — into the world, into "your" world, which immediately ceases to be only "yours" and becomes "ours," "others'," and "everyone's."

A first observation, then: accompanying young people requires physical gestures of recognition. In an age in which bodily gestures are replaced by virtual symbols, it becomes difficult to find rituals and actions that help us recognize our companions along the road. Breaking bread has become rare — perhaps because supermarkets sell it already sliced, in an attempt to eliminate effort, exertion, bodily engagement. Even the effort of raising a thumb to say "I agree" — a gesture whose meaning is socially constructed and historically variable — has been replaced by a click on social media. One wonders whether those who use the "like" button thousands of times a day realize that, according to historical studies, in Roman

arenas a raised thumb did not signal mercy for the defeated gladiator but rather his death. A bitter irony in a dehistoricized and trivializing digital culture.

Accompaniment is always embodied, never merely virtual. One cannot accompany the soul without also accompanying the body. We are wary of the exaggerated enthusiasm surrounding so-called "new technologies," especially the oxymoron "distance learning" — which risks being as contradictory as "liquid sky," were the latter not infinitely more poetic. Certainly, to accompany means to modulate distance: to let go, to observe from afar, to step back. But this always takes place within a proximity that remains physical, even when the body chooses to stand slightly apart — like Virgil when Dante speaks to the suicides.

To accompany means to take responsibility for the body of the boy or girl — for its fatigue, its pleasure, even its pain. A pain that remains private, intimate, at times inexpressible — but which, when acknowledged, can be accompanied toward possible healing. Dante and Virgil labor along the steep paths of Hell, and at times the reader forgets that only one of them possesses a living body. Physical closeness matters.

To know how to embrace without invading, to know when to gesture and when to refrain, to read body language without improvising as psychoanalysts: all this belongs to the educator's craft. Accompaniment is an art — but arts can be learned. To reduce everything to a vague educational "talent" means refusing to recognize educators as professionals.

Educational accompaniment is not rhetorical. It does not erase differences; it is not a tourist package offering identical itineraries to anonymous customers. Every young person has his or her own way of being accompanied, and this represents a major challenge for the educator. "Treating everyone the same" makes sense when speaking of rights, but it becomes false when applied mechanically to educational relationships. Education offers equal dignity and opportunity, but through relationships that are never identical, because they are tailored to the individual.

The road may be the same for all, and sometimes it must be, but the pace at which we walk it is never the same. Educators know how to adapt to each child's rhythm — and above all, they know how to tune themselves to the slowest:

> "Let my lord go on ahead of his servant, and I will proceed slowly, at the pace of the livestock that are before me and at the pace of the children." (Gen 33:14)

Accustomed to the rhetoric of leaders who place themselves ahead of the masses — perhaps without noticing that no one is following — we have forgotten that true leadership bends down to the struggling child or the wounded lamb. To accompany certainly means encouraging movement, motivating the journey; but it must never become a frantic race in which those who fall behind are treated as "collateral damage." The words "education" and "competition" cannot coexist; their logics exclude one another. One of the most troubling aspects of contemporary schooling is precisely the importation of competitive categories from the marketplace. Once again, pedagogy has welcomed the Trojan horse, and the voices warning against it grow fewer.

But the principal rhetoric undermined by educational accompaniment is that of the supposed equality between educator and learner — not in terms of rights, but in terms of responsibility. They do not travel in parallel, but "one before and the other after," because one knows the way and bears responsibility for guiding, while the other must discover it. We often hear educators say, "I do not know which path to propose," or teachers claim, "I have nothing to teach." We are only waiting for a physician to declare that there is no therapy to prescribe in order to complete the circle of banal rhetoric. When a young person entrusts himself or herself to an educator, what is being requested is a path — one to follow, to question, perhaps even to abandon — but a path nonetheless.

It is healthy for educators to harbor doubts about the meaning and direction of their work; doubt protects against presumption and arrogance. But doubts are worked through within the educational team, not transferred onto the shoulders of the young.

Does this mean that the educational relationship is undemocratic? Here lies the paradox: one can educate for democracy — and even practice forms such as peer education — through a relationship that is not structurally symmetrical. There are those who decide and those who do not. And even when it is the learner who decides, it is the educator who "decides who decides." To indicate a path means to assume responsibility — something that those who disguise educational relationships as mere peer friendships are careful to avoid.

Of course, an educator must learn from his or her students; indeed, this is one of the educator's primary professional qualities. But the difference remains: the educator bears the full responsibility of the educational relationship. Even when learning from students, the educator remains responsible for what is learned and how it is integrated. This is a strong vision of education — necessary in a time when weak thinking dissolves thought itself, and with it pedagogy.

No destination is ever fully certain in a world of rapid change; no path is definitively laid out forever. Yet as educators, we cannot allow our students to be shipwrecked by the rhetoric that the path exists only by walking it. "Caminante, no hay camino" is a magnificent line by Antonio Machado; but if we read it pedagogically, we must ask whether it is ethical to expose young people to the "open sea" of absolute uncertainty, which often borders on an equally absolute relativism — a relativism that makes relativity itself the only absolute.

Between the arrogance of the authoritarian leader and the despair of the castaway, there is no place for either in the educational relationship. The educator has survived shipwreck, has crossed the open sea, has glimpsed Hell, and now seeks to guide the child toward a path of salvation. He or she may not know every step of the journey; may fear its pitfalls and blind turns — but knows that a path exists.

In this sense, the journey can begin. The companion is something different from a dictator, from a friend, from a lost soul. The companion knows how to kindle hope and trust in the young person, so that the journey may truly start — and so that one day the young person may say:

> "Then he moved on, and I followed after him." (*Inferno*, I, 136)

## 2. EYES ON THE COMPASS. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GUIDE

> *… he seized me by both arms;*
> *then, holding me close against his breast,*
> *he climbed back up the path he had descended.*
> Dante, *Inferno*, XIX, 124–126

He protects, guides, lets you move ahead, calls you back; he removes stones from the path, places some where there are none, digs holes, fills them, digs them again; he comforts the weary, encourages the hesitant, slows the reckless; he knows the way yet pretends not to, is momentarily lost yet acts as though he knows the path: he is the educational guide.

It is a demanding role, one that touches those who assume it at depths they often did not even know they possessed. It requires the highest level of technical competence, relational intelligence, and emotional maturity. An "impossible profession," as Freud famously defined it:

> "It almost seems that analysis is the third of those 'impossible' professions in which one can be sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfying results. The other two, known much longer, are education and government."[1]

It is a role that demands detachment and closeness, moments of distance and moments of full presence, measured involvement and what might be called warm distance. It changes every day, yet requires stable reference points so as not to lose oneself in relationships whose protagonists constantly change.

Educating is difficult — so difficult that in recent years we have encountered educators who claim they do not wish to educate. "I cannot educate anyone." "I have nothing to teach." Such statements may appear humble, but they often mask surrender — an abdication of responsibility. It would be as if a physician declared himself unable to treat patients, or a statesman confessed to having no vision for the common good. These declarations are also evasive: they relinquish responsibility and abandon students, who will understandably seek guidance elsewhere.

The first characteristic of a guide is confidence — a confidence never immune from doubt, often transformed into the confidence of having doubts, but never collapsing into the extremes of arrogance or nihilism. The educator must display assurance even when uncertain, because the role requires knowing the way — or, if temporarily disoriented, knowing how to recover direction.

No fashionable relativism can persuade us that there exists perfect symmetry between educator and student, guide and guided. If such symmetry were complete, we would simply speak of friendship, without invoking education at all — a word already among the most overused and misunderstood in contemporary discourse.

The educator's first assurance is knowing that somewhere nearby there is a colleague — someone to consult, to learn from, to share responsibility with. The educational role should never be exercised in isolation. If education teaches cooperation, the first thing to share must be our educational practice itself, freeing ourselves from protagonism, narcissism, or any illusion of superiority.

Any reversal of the pedagogical relationship that is not consciously and strategically educational places on learners a responsibility that is not theirs. Of course, educators learn from their students; indeed, this is one of their essential professional qualities. But they do not ask students to become guides. They may allow them to lead at times, yet it remains clear that the educator is the one who determines when and

how this occurs. The educator is not always the one who decides — but is always the one who decides who decides.

This also means that the guide must know how to learn from mistakes. Such learning is impossible if one conducts a merciless hunt for errors, identifying and punishing whoever commits them. When educators make mistakes — and they do — they may not recognize them immediately, sometimes only much later. This is one reason why educational work must be carried out in teams or at least in pairs, where one educator observes the other and, afterward — privately or collectively — highlights both strengths and areas for improvement. Educational work should always include real-time supervision. This would also clarify that the educator's task is not only to act, but also to observe, to step back, to refrain.

What should a guide do when a glacier blocks the group's path? Attempt the crossing or turn back? Protection is undoubtedly part of the guide's task — but when does protection become overprotection? It is curious that in societies where it has been proposed that adolescents be escorted from school directly into their parents' arms, those same adolescents are often left alone for hours before a screen — perhaps the greatest contemporary risk they face.

Daniele Novara has distinguished clearly between risk and danger. Dangers must be avoided; deliberately exposing a child to danger is morally wrong and often criminal. Risk, however, is a calculated exposure — and cannot be removed from human life. Education must avoid dangers but cannot avoid risk; indeed, it must sometimes deliberately introduce it. It is the educational relationship itself that protects — reinforcing and sometimes substituting concrete actions. Protection means making it known that we are present, even when that presence appears to be ignored. This is especially characteristic of adolescence: the guide must be psychologically capable of enduring apparent detachment and indifference.

For the guide knows not only the way, but also that the way must be learned personally — and that each person learns differently. A balance must therefore be struck between directing and letting go. Freud evokes this tension through the mythological figures of Scylla, "she who sucks in," and Charybdis, "she who tears apart," the whirlpools threatening sailors in the Strait of Messina:

> "Education must seek a path between the Scylla of laissez-faire and the Charybdis of frustrating prohibition. Assuming that the task is not insoluble, an optimum must be found that allows education to achieve the maximum and cause the minimum harm."[2]

Thus the educator may sometimes pretend to be lost, in order to see whether the student can find the way. Rousseau famously describes such a scene in *Emile*, where the tutor feigns disorientation:

> "Very hot, very tired, very hungry, our running about only serves to lose us more and more… Emile does not deliberate; he cries. He does not know that we are at the gate of Montmorency, and that a simple copse hides it from us."[3]

After crying, the boy — guided but not replaced — attempts to understand his position, recalls what he knows about orientation (knowledge previously given by the tutor), and eventually finds the path. Rousseau concludes:

> "Now you can be sure that he will never forget the lesson of that day."[4]

The educator, therefore, always keeps an eye on the compass, even when this vigilance remains discreet. But where is north? Toward what is the educator guiding? If education is a technique, we must ask why and for what it is exercised. Surgical skill is also a technique — but used very differently by a conscientious surgeon and by an organ trafficker. The distinction is not technical competence, but moral direction.

The Nazi who trained youth in anti-Semitic hatred was, tragically, a technically competent educator — but his compass pointed toward a murderous north. The plumber summoned to Auschwitz to repair

showers releasing Zyklon B may have been technically skilled; yet the decision to repair or sabotage was moral and political. The same applies to educators.

The word "politics" may carry negative connotations, especially in certain contexts, yet at its root it means an idea of the *polis* — a vision of shared life, an anticipated image of society. Education as technique remains an instrument — crucial, sometimes decisive — but always oriented toward that broader vision.

The guide's role is difficult because this north must never harden into dogma. Paths must remain flexible, yet the existence of a destination must never be denied. Education does not proceed in circles. And although a straight line may be the shortest distance between two points, it is almost never the most educational one.

Do we know where we are leading our children? Are our eyes fixed on the compass, our imagination already envisioning the destination? Do we still believe that a destination exists? No educator can avoid asking these questions, sooner or later.

---

NOTES

[1] Sigmund Freud, *Terminable and Interminable Analysis*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1977, p. 64.
[2] Sigmund Freud, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis. First and Second Series of Lectures*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1978, p. 545.
[3] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, Brescia, La Scuola, 1973, p. 221.
[4] Ibid., p. 223.

## 3. LIGHT BACKPACKS. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THOSE WHO ALLOW THEMSELVES TO BE ACCOMPANIED

*Emile is an orphan.*
*It does not matter that he has*
*a father and a mother:*
*having taken on their duties,*
*I inherit all their rights.*
(Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*)

You do not choose your students. They arrive by circumstance; you must work with them as they are. You cannot pre-select them. You find them before you, and even if they do not correspond to your expectations or imagination, they are what they are — and that is what you must engage with.

Or perhaps not?

We should not be naive. We must honestly acknowledge that every educational proposal, from a certain perspective, pre-selects its students. The very act of designing a project, drafting a program, establishing rules — all of this functions as a threshold, a gate that shapes access to the educational relationship. Leaving school aside, any educational initiative that requires a choice by the student (or by parents or guardians) already presupposes an image of the student. Nursery school may be theoretically open to all children, yet in practice it is attended by those whose parents choose it. The snake risks biting its own tail.

We must therefore guard against excessive rigidity in the implicit pre-selection embedded within educational projects — but we must also avoid the illusion that any project is truly addressed to "everyone." Those who dislike the mountains are unlikely to join an excursion; those who hate them certainly will not. Those who do not enjoy football will not enjoy the match.

Incidentally: is it written in the Gospels — or prescribed by a physician — that every educational project must include a football game, and that every initiative must end with a match between educators and students? Are we so enslaved by habit and fashion that we cannot imagine alternatives to football — a sport not free from violence, corruption, and financial excess? Have we become so unimaginative as educators that we follow only the most predictable paths, replacing one cliché (the football match) with another equally worn-out one (the treasure hunt)?

The educational process — which we might define as the "construction" of the learner — begins long before the students arrive, when we sit around a table to plan the project we intend to propose. Planning is already education.

The real issue lies in what remains implicit and latent in this process — what is often called the "hidden curriculum": the construction of the learner that occurs, in a sense, behind the educator's back. In this regard, the architecture of education — the spaces and times through which educational processes unfold — profoundly shapes subject formation.

As Fulvio Papi writes:

> "Those who concern themselves with the question of good education are often unaware that the very architecture of the school marks the educational process: the dormitory disciplines sleep; the long corridors distribute interior and social spaces; the gardens shape discourse and its forms. Spatial organization structures the aims of socialization and

> supervision, assigns roles between pupils and teachers and among pupils themselves, organizes classes, and creates the conditions for communal eating and shared experience. Every educational organization has its own microphysics: the mind and body of the learner undergo a process of transformation and adaptation to various models. It is an education whose recipient is constructed."[1]

This powerful pedagogical insight must not be misunderstood as radical structural determinism. The learner is not wholly constructed by context. Yet it reminds us that the children before us are always already "within" an educational project. We are not merely the institutions we have passed through, but we are marked by them — especially at deep and often unconscious levels.

The decision to sleep in tents produces one kind of educational effect; the decision to stay in a hotel produces another. Neither is inherently superior. What matters is coherence with the aims of the educational project. We must ask what educational spaces and times are doing to — and for — those who inhabit them.

This reflection also protects us from what Michel Foucault called the "will to know": the temptation to claim knowledge of the young person outside the educational context, an impulse that can easily become intrusive and disrespectful of privacy. It is neither possible nor desirable to know everything.

Perhaps we must accept that the "outside" always eludes us, and that in their relationship with us, children present the "mask" of the learner — using the Greek sense of the term, rich with ambiguity. The mask is both person and role; it does not exhaust the individual, yet it defines the relational space in which education occurs. Beyond it, we should not go.

In this sense, Rousseau invites us to think of our students as "orphans," because the educational relationship creates a space distinct from other spheres of life, including family. Entrusting one's child to a stranger — however competent — is never a trivial decision. And after events such as the narrowly avoided tragedy in Sant'Angelo Lodigiano in March 2019, one cannot avoid asking what criteria are used to select those entrusted with children's care. Is a driving license sufficient to operate a school bus? Is being a waiter enough to work in a school cafeteria?

Rather than indulging in sensational political speculation, certain media outlets would do better to confront such questions seriously. Yet once children are entrusted to us, responsibility for their education is entirely ours. It is too easy — and somewhat cowardly — to blame the internet, families, schools, or society at large. If children spend eight hours a day online, that is indeed troubling; but now they are here, with me, and I can work with them on their relationship to the digital world.

There remains, however, a trace of the "outside" that children bring with them — and perhaps it explains why they are here, before us. It is the need for education, the desire for guidance that characterizes adolescence and youth. Anyone who observes them honestly and without prejudice can see that, now more than ever, they are quietly and movingly asking to be accompanied, guided, and listened to — by an adult generation often too distracted to respond.

If a fifteen-year-old boy writes letters to Dylan Dog, confiding his secret fears to a comic-book character, perhaps the adult world should not respond with irony but with shame.

The extraordinary purity — the almost virgin quality — of the child's gaze reminds us of our duty to educate. It tells us that we cannot withdraw. As Pasolini writes:

> "Children and young people are generally admirable beings, full of that virgin substance of humanity which is hope and goodwill; adults, by contrast, are often imbeciles, made vulgar and hypocritical (alienated) by the social institutions in which they gradually became entangled as they grew up."[2]

Education need not end in such degeneration. Yet recognizing that the child's desire for education is the sole justification for educating — for inviting them into a project for which we bear full responsibility, and which will shape their identity and open new possibilities of being — is the first step toward true accompaniment.

For one can never truly accompany those who do not feel the desire to be accompanied — nor those who, after searching, finally find someone genuinely willing to respond to that desire.

---

NOTES

[1] Fulvio Papi, *Educazione*, Isedi, 1978, p. 45; republished as *Sull'educazione*, Mimesis.
[2] Pier Paolo Pasolini, *I Dialoghi*, Editori Riuniti, Rome, 1992, p. 150.

## 4. THE ROPE TEAM. THE COMMUNITY OF THOSE WHO ACCOMPANY

> *"I got a 7."*
> *"Yes, but a 7 with Prof. Rossi is worth as much as an 8 with Prof. Bianchi."*
> (Heard in countless schools)

It is easy to say that we are a community. It costs nothing: eight letters, easily pronounced, though perhaps that final accent — like all truncated words — causes a slight hesitation. But the word itself poses no difficulty.

At least in pedagogical discourse, however, the concept has somewhat fallen out of fashion. It evokes the 1970s, collectivism, excessive democracy. In a competitive, profit-driven society, what matters is rivalry; everything becomes competition. Education is adapting to this logic, increasingly resembling a service delivered on demand: I pay, therefore you must give me what I want — if not to me directly, then at least to "my child."

The grotesque culinary or musical talent shows broadcast on television (those who educate young people should have the courage to endure such rubbish in order to understand what shapes adolescents' imagination) perfectly convey the prevailing pedagogical subculture: one against the other — students and so-called teachers alike — locked in ruthless competition, marked by personal attacks, arbitrary judgments, betrayals.

The idea that education is the exact opposite of competition struggles to gain ground. Yet in a rope team, it is not those at the front who are more valuable, but those who know how to serve the others. The entire rope team reaches the summit — not merely the strongest, the most agile, or the most intelligent.

The problem is that we often ask young people to become a community without first building a community of educators. Frequently, genuine and deep passion for education translates into individualistic practice: "me and my kids," even when a team of educators formally exists.

Indeed, educational work should never be carried out in isolation. The dynamics it activates are profound; the risks of narcissism — or, conversely, of self-deprecation — are constant. Many educators oscillate within hours between "I can do everything" (a delusion) and "I can do nothing" (an alibi). Education requires sustained critical reflection, and such reflection demands shared work.

Yet groups of educators are not immune to envy and jealousy. Pretending these do not exist is pointless. Nor is it helpful to indulge in excessive guilt or to imagine ourselves morally superior. These are human weaknesses, and they must be acknowledged and worked through.

There is a clear difference between taking pride in one's work and considering oneself the best educator in the world; between appreciating one's competence and envying that of a colleague. Learning from colleagues is difficult — but it is an essential element in the educator's own human and professional growth.

And what about the colleague we simply do not like?

Denying the emotion is both useless and impossible. Instead, we must discern: is the dislike superficial? Is it rooted in personal matters unrelated to educational work (the colleague who "stole my girlfriend")? Or is it a disagreement about educational methods, relational styles, approaches with young people?

If it is a matter of differing educational perspectives, the issue must be addressed openly in team meetings. If it belongs to the first two categories, maturity demands that private life remain separate from educational life — especially in language, attitudes, non-verbal communication. Children possess an extraordinary sensitivity to such nuances.

The same applies in positive cases. If two educators are also partners in their private lives, it may be wise — as far as possible — to separate their educational roles. When organizational constraints make this impossible (though pedagogical reasons must always take precedence over organizational convenience), they must take particular care not to display excessive familiarity. Not for moralistic reasons, but because it may disturb team equilibrium. The relationship need not be hidden; rather, it must be lived in such a way that it does not interfere with educational responsibilities.

What should we do when we see a colleague making a mistake?

The spirit of *parrhesia* — frank and courageous speech — that ought to characterize an educational community would suggest that we point it out. Yet matters are rarely simple. Is it truly a "mistake," or merely something I would have done differently?

The answer depends on the shared educational project. An educational action is never right or wrong in itself; it is right or wrong in relation to agreed objectives and methods. This is why an educational team must work effectively even in the absence of children. Time invested in meetings — provided they are sincere and focused — makes time with children more fruitful.

The question is always one of coherence between means and ends. Is this method, this language, this attitude, this behavior — even this clothing (how much educators should reflect on this!) — consistent with our educational goals?

If the answer appears to be no, intervention is necessary. Not through reprimand — never in front of the children — but through dialogue. Rather than saying, "You were wrong," it is more constructive to describe what was observed: "I saw you do this; I would like to describe what I perceived, and it seemed to me that this message was conveyed." Even in meetings, the aim is not to stage trials but to recount actions and reflect together on whether the team's rudder — to shift metaphors — is still pointed in the agreed direction.

Educational work cannot be solitary. This does not merely mean that several educators carry out activities simultaneously. It also means creating moments when one educator observes while others lead. At the end of the day, the observer shares what was noticed; roles rotate. Such live supervision fosters growth.

How are decisions made within the team? "By majority vote," one might answer. Certainly — but always in light of shared objectives, which cannot be renegotiated constantly. The coherence between means and ends remains the criterion.

And if my brilliant idea is rejected? If the majority decides differently from me? Here lies a fragile point in many teams.

"I'll do it anyway." Few sentences undermine collective work so quickly. If one belongs to a group, one accepts its decisions. One may request further discussion, but one never undermines the team before the children, implying, "I am the only competent one; the others are mistaken."

Let us conclude by highlighting a crucial competence for educators: knowing when to hand over.

There are days when nothing works. Worse, there are children with whom that particular relational spark does not ignite — and since such bonds cannot be mechanically switched on, this is entirely human. In

such cases, we must recognize our limits and seek support, literally passing the baton. We must overcome the narcissism that whispers, “It is impossible for you to succeed where I have failed.”

It is “we” who educate — and I am part of that “we.” Leaving a child temporarily to a colleague’s care may be the most responsible and effective educational gesture one can make.

---

NOTES

[1] The term “colleague” is used generically to indicate a member of the group or team, not necessarily in a strictly professional sense: the word also includes the other youth worker at a summer camp. Likewise, “educational work” does not necessarily refer to paid activity.

## 5. MAPS: HOW (NOT) TO GET LOST ALONG THE WAY

*If you believe the earth is flat*
*then you have reached the end of the world.*
*But if you believe the earth is round,*
*then climb aboard! Let's set out in circles!*
(Area, *La mela di Odessa*)

There is something extraordinarily captivating about maps. They are objects of rare beauty, witnesses to culture, history, and power. They carry within them the charm of antiquity and futurity, of promise and memory. Baudelaire sensed this clearly:

"For the child in love with maps and engravings,
the universe equals his vast desire.
How immense the world appears in the lamplight,
how small in the eyes of memory!"[1]

Maps awaken dreams because they promise travel, adventure, new horizons.

Yet drawing a map requires competence: reference points, orientation, the ability to recognize the features of a territory. In education as well, offering children maps is difficult and complex. We cannot abdicate this responsibility by delegating orientation to Google Earth or TomTom — troubling symbols of an age that has lost its bearings and entrusts the demanding task of navigation to machines.

Every map has a center — chosen, inevitably, arbitrarily. It has a scale that must be interpreted, conventional signs that must be decoded, and above all an orientation, itself dependent on the mapmaker's perspective (consider sinocentric maps placing China at the center, or "upside-down" maps that represent the world from the South).

Educational accompaniment likewise requires reference points: shared, continuously questioned, flexible — yet present. One does not draw maps of nothingness. Nihilism — a philosophy for the comfortable — permits no accompaniment. In the face of nothingness, we stand alone, and pedagogy itself dissolves.

We must therefore teach young people to draw maps — of the world and of their own lives — because maps define limits.

Limits: a word that today is endlessly invoked. "Young people have no limits." "There is no limit to how bad things can get." "No limits!" proclaimed a commercial tragically linked to the death of a free climber.

Perhaps we need to recover the positive meaning of the word. Not by coincidence does it appear in Article 1 of the Italian Constitution: "Sovereignty belongs to the people, who exercise it in the forms and within the limits of the Constitution."

It is significant that the Constitution unites the concepts of form and limit. Form has been subjected to relentless attacks, as though all forms must be dismantled — in politics as in education — in the name of immediacy and spontaneity. Yet this confuses form with formalism.

Formalism is form emptied of meaning, often used to deceive. The relationship between form and formalism resembles what Ricoeur distinguishes between a living metaphor ("you are a fox") and a dead one ("the legs of a table"): the former sets thought in motion; the latter arrests it in empty schematism.

In music, as in education, form channels imagination in order to unleash it. It contains in order to generate. It directs and then releases.

Respect for form in human relationships — especially educational ones — is also respect for others and for the humanity of all participants. Adorno observed:

> "The abolition of conventions as useless, antiquated and superficial trappings consecrates the most superficial reality of all, a life of immediate domination. And the disappearance even of this caricature of tact — replaced by camaraderie based on pushing and shoving — makes existence still more unbearable, a further sign of the growing impossibility of human coexistence in present conditions."[2]

In a society where forms — grammatical, artistic, behavioral, conversational — are dismissed as mere formalism, insisting with Adorno that form is sedimented content leads us to recognize the social dimension embedded within form itself. What is form today was content yesterday. Even the simple greeting "ciao" contains, historically, the offering of oneself as servant — an expression of radical availability to the other.

Through attention to form, limits are respected. To set a limit is to give oneself form, to shape oneself, to internalize respect for the rule as second nature.

Much rhetoric about "rules" in education — even when promoted by celebrated figures who have turned it into a trademark — would be unnecessary if we presented respect for rules as an opportunity for self-formation. If we showed that recycling is not merely compliance but a way of becoming better. Guiding young people means presenting them with an image of adulthood that is beautiful and desirable — and the limits within which one must remain in order to become such an adult.

Yet this is only one side of the coin.

The educational guide not only draws maps to help others find their way; he or she also invents roads on which it is possible to get lost. The experience of getting lost is profoundly educational. Walter Benjamin writes in recalling his childhood:

> "Not knowing one's way around a city does not mean much. To get lost in a city — as one gets lost in a forest — requires practice. Street names must speak to the wanderer like the crackling of dry twigs, and the narrow lanes of the city center must mark the hours as clearly as a mountain valley. I learned this art late in life; it fulfilled the dream whose first traces were the labyrinths on the blotting paper in my school notebooks."[3]

But what does it mean to get lost?

It means playing with fear. It means exploring the reverse side of things, the streets absent from maps, the labyrinths traced on blotting paper or sewing patterns. It means rediscovering the hidden heart of cities in scrapyards and faded shop signs, seeking margins, edges, recesses, ruins.

Only the experience of being lost gives meaning to maps. Only the desire to find a way out gives significance to landmarks.

This becomes clear in Rousseau's account of Emile, after he has found the road that his tutor pretended to lose — using astronomical knowledge learned the day before:

> "Let us go to breakfast, let us go to lunch; let us hurry. Astronomy is useful."[4]

Even if he does not pronounce that final sentence aloud, he thinks it. Rousseau comments that Emile will never forget the lesson of that day, whereas had he merely been instructed theoretically in a room, the lesson would have been forgotten by the next day.

Yet maps also conceal a presumption: that they can schematize all of reality, trace the boundaries of the universe and even what lies beyond. For this reason, we must value the gaps in maps — the blank spaces, the unsaid, the undrawn, the undrawable.

If anything is more disturbing than nihilistic education, it is totalizing education: an education that claims to contain all truth, to map every territory, to enclose existence within Cartesian coordinates.

We must teach how to draw maps — but above all, how to lean beyond them. Like the figure in a medieval map who bends curiously beyond the margin, attempting to glimpse what lies beyond.

Beyond maps lies life: nature, the wild, the wilderness.

Wildness exists at the margins of education and pedagogy, just as unexplored lands once lay at the margins of ancient maps. Today, as then, *hic sunt leones* — here are lions. And here, in this space free from educational domination, there exist — now as then — countless splendid creatures, free from human subjugation, free from pedagogical control: mountains and rivers, animals and plants, lands and moons that

> have the imperceptible whisper,
> make no more noise
> than the growing of grass
> silent where no human passes.[5]

---

NOTES

[1] Charles Baudelaire, *Le Voyage*, in *Œuvres*, Milan: Mondadori, 1996, p. 263.
[2] Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, Turin: Einaudi, 1979, p. 32.
[3] Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Turin: Einaudi, 1973, p. 9.
[4] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, Brescia: La Scuola, 1965, p. 223.
[5] Salvatore Quasimodo, "Non gridate più."

## 6. THE WALL AND THE REFUGE: BETWEEN STRUGGLE AND CONFIRMATION

*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*
(I am human; nothing human is alien to me.)
Publius Terentius Afer

The mountain is everything: it is effort and joy; it is cool relief and biting cold; it is risk and therefore adventure; it is the capacity to act and the experience of not being able to act, even of surrender. The mountain is everything because it mirrors life — and education should be the same.

To accompany a young person along life's path means guiding them through experiences of liberation but also of effort; teaching them to enjoy and also to endure suffering. Everything — not half of everything. The guide cannot treat life as a restaurant menu from which one selects only what is pleasant, nor as an obstacle course devised by a sadist.

It is disheartening to observe, in education, the contrast between those who never praise children and confine themselves to criticism ("otherwise they will become complacent") and those who refuse ever to point out mistakes, flattering them in order to win approval. Parents who constantly reprimand and punish their children — perhaps comparing them unfavorably with others — and those who deny evident shortcomings represent two sides of the same coin: a fragmented education that does not address the whole person but divides personality according to convenience.

Yet the human being is one and indivisible, and must be accompanied in his or her entirety.

In recent years, it has become fashionable to speak of emotions in education. But educating emotions only makes sense if all emotions are included. Fear, joy, anger, hope — every human emotion must find a place within the educational project. Terence's phrase is not only a philosophical statement; it can and must serve as a pedagogical program. When we climb a mountain, we go with body and soul, with fear and respect, with joy and trembling anticipation.

Within an educational program, emphasizing effort alone leads down a blind path and into a labyrinth without exit. Meaningless fatigue corrodes a person from within, like an illness. It is not always necessary to know in detail the reason behind an effort, nor to see clearly the final goal toward which it leads; sometimes trust in the educator enables a young person to undertake difficult routes.

But effort in itself is not educational. It must be embedded within a horizon of meaning; it must serve a purpose; it must unfold within a relationship. Otherwise, it becomes sterile fatigue. Primo Levi reminds us that meaningless exhaustion was one of the principal instruments of depersonalization in the anti-pedagogy of the concentration camps.

The same applies to pain. Any mythologizing or aestheticizing of pain is dangerous. Pain, an unavoidable sign of human finitude, acquires educational significance only when placed within a meaningful framework. Aeschylus wrote: "It is sweet for the sufferer to know clearly the pain that must still be endured."[1] Pain that is acknowledged and framed within meaning wounds less deeply; it allows, at least in part, transcendence.

Human beings — like all living beings — naturally seek to minimize pain and maximize pleasure. Education involves teaching acceptance of the former (while doing everything possible to alleviate it) and the capacity to defer the latter (without eliminating joy from life's experience). If we insist exclusively on the supposed educational value of pain, we risk producing what Freud called the "discontent of civilization": individuals incapable of joy, pessimistic and nihilistic, for whom suffering becomes the sole

meaning of existence. Such individuals may inflict pain on others without hesitation, regarding it as an absolute detached from any experience of joy.

Aching legs after a climb remind us of the effort made; they restore meaning to the action. That pain tells a story, summarizes a choice, expresses determination. We did not climb in order to suffer; yet without that ache, the ascent would have been less meaningful. We might as well have paved the path and ascended in an SUV — or remained at home gazing at mountain photographs online.

Similarly, wrinkles, signs of aging, cracks in the vessel of life, possess their own beauty: they testify to lived experience. Japanese artisans practicing *kintsugi* fill cracks in broken pottery with gold, transforming fractures into marks of uniqueness. Aging is not a tragic destiny but the accumulation of memory — woven from good and evil, joy and sorrow. Educational accompaniment does not deny obstacles; it helps discern which to confront and which to avoid, and above all to understand their function within the journey.

Climbing also involves risk — that search for intensity that drives young people to reckless gestures: jumping from bridges, taking selfies on train tracks as trains approach, driving at night without headlights to test whether death is truly so near. "These young people today," we say. Yet the song *Emozioni* dates from 1970. Adults were once young too; they have simply forgotten, as the Little Prince reminds us.

The more pressing question is this: why do young people fail to experience intensity within educational processes? What is the point of an educational project that never makes one's heart race?

The guide knows how to generate intensity by allowing the environment itself to educate. The mountain teaches. It determines whether I can climb it; it reveals the path to the summit; it warns me not to depart when clouds foretell a storm.

This does not mean that the guide never intervenes. Rather, one of the guide's essential competencies lies in recognizing educational potential within situations. The educator's intelligence consists in *intus-legere* — reading within things — discerning how they can present themselves to the young person, what challenges they may pose, what paths they may suggest.

This recalls Rousseau's principle of negative education: allowing the road to educate the traveler — though the road has been selected and prepared in advance. It is educational because the educator has chosen it and has drawn attention to each bend, each obstacle, each clearing. If the path is partly artificial, shaped by the educator's intervention, as in a treasure hunt, so be it. Education is not a natural phenomenon; it is a profoundly cultural one.

And interwoven with all this — within that emotional tangle where joy and pain are not easily distinguished — lies not the "conquest" of the summit (what a sterile expression), but the quiet joy of stillness once one has arrived:

> "I will sit among the stones and say nothing, I promise. Just long enough to catch my breath, to eat two squares of chocolate, to feel it melt on my palate. There is no point in rushing to the summit at this hour. In a moment we will descend. Now I simply want to remain calm and look around me — all around me — from that peak still bathed in sunlight, the two of us sheltered by a ridge."[2]

The joy of arrival is fleeting — and precisely for that reason, it is among the most profound joys a human being can experience.

Perhaps we must recognize that the meaning of education lies above all in the shared enjoyment of the journey itself. Not in conquering something, but in the slow, demanding, and joyful discovery of oneself

— of that strange and inseparable mixture of happiness and fear that defines the human condition, and from which nothing may be excluded.

---

NOTES

[1] Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, Venice: Marsilio, 2011, p. 110.
[2] Michele Serra, "Walter," in *Il nuovo che avanza*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1990.

## 7. FALSE GUIDES: THE CHARM OF THOSE WHO LEAD US TO EVIL

*But if, without letting yourself be charmed,*
*your eye can peer into the abyss…*
(Charles Baudelaire, *Epigraph for a Condemned Book*)

Even evil has its peaks, its vistas, its challenges—and, above all, its sherpas. We cannot fight evil effectively unless we grasp its full appeal and, above all, its educational force. Approaching evil is a pedagogical task: there are those who accompany crime, violence, and the breakdown of solidarity, and we must understand them if we want to counter them with accompaniment toward the good.

Educators, guides, companions. It may seem unsettling, as pedagogues, to apply such words to criminals; yet precisely as pedagogues we have learned to fear education, to recognize it as a powerful instrument that must be handled with extreme caution. First of all, this means that education is not good or bad in itself. Education is a tool—like a scalpel: in the hands of a cardiac surgeon it saves a life; in the hands of Jack the Ripper it takes one. And the killer may well possess the same technical mastery; indeed, as is so often the case with hatred, killing is infinitely easier than saving. In general, murder is among the simplest acts a human being can perform.

The path that draws a young person toward evil is, first of all, a journey inward. It begins in the depths of desire, brushing against those dark impulses each of us carries beneath the threshold of awareness—impulses that return to daylight transfigured into dreams or slips of the tongue. The guide to evil explores inner territories the young person senses are there, fears, and that often no one has ever wanted to see. Sport, music, and the web are the probes the sherpas of hatred send into young people's souls.

Why these probes are not employed with equal effectiveness by those who wish to educate for the good is a complex question and deserves careful study. It is certainly easier to use a website, a chant, or a slogan in a stadium to educate for extermination than it is to communicate positive values. A banner reading "f*ing n**r" will always "work" more immediately than one that says "All together: no to racism," because the atmosphere—especially in the stands—trivializes messages and refuses the additional mental step required by the second (which is also, in itself, rather banal). But the second message has an even deeper weakness: it addresses only the rational dimension of the person, whereas the first plunges into darker regions—the womb in which representations and ideas are formed, and the hunting ground of those who guide others toward evil.

The phrase attributed to Freud is almost certainly apocryphal—"Whether I kill my father in a dream or in reality, for my unconscious it is the same thing, but for my father it is not"—yet it expresses something essential. Desire is always innocent, partly because in its deepest layers it is unconscious and unknown even to the one who experiences it. Guilt begins in the passage from desire to action; ethics concerns deeds, not impulses. The dark desires of young people (and of each of us) cannot simply be erased; they must be redirected—away from the routes offered by educators of violence.

The sherpas of violence are fascinating: they attract and they poison, as the double etymology of *fascinum* reminds us. They appear "beautiful" because they must be able to reach young people in order to sow the seeds of evil. (Good also has seeds, but good does not intoxicate life in the same way: after doing good, we do not feel irresistibly hooked, unable to live without it. Evil chooses us, conditions us, uses us; good must be chosen anew, every time. There is no automatism in doing good.) In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Lucifer's charm is undeniable. If the companion of evil were not charming, no one would follow. It is a complex charm, not reducible to physical attractiveness (Hitler, by the very aesthetic standards exalted by the Third Reich, cannot be called "beautiful"—and this remains one of the many enigmas of Nazism).

The charm of the educator of evil is one-sided: he wants everyone to become like him, and he never truly sees the beauty of young people—only their usefulness. A Nazi colonel looks at the youth of a conquered nation in these terms:

> "The colonel did not see before him the flowering of human beings, the bright dawn of human morning—another new creation of man, another expansion of the species and its development. He did not see what makes youth sacred in every country in the world. He saw only the adolescence of an enemy people, only recently subjugated, that still did not feel sufficient respect or sufficient fear before their new masters."[1]

To educate for evil means to erase differences in the name of a convenient homogeneity; it means to impose a unilateral, one-way process of growth. The educator does not change—cannot and must not change—because he is producing his own clones. He places himself beyond critique; the young must become exactly like him, and he himself was once formed to conform to an external model. Education for evil can be thrilling in its methods, but its outcomes are endlessly dull: it prepares a world in which only one note resounds, the monotonous violence exercised against the weak. And once the last weak person has been eliminated, there will remain only the silence of madness.

Yet the companion of evil possesses a decisive weapon: the ability to turn initiation rituals into pedagogy. The rituals of evil are violent, but they mobilize energies that are not, in themselves, either positive or negative. Such rituals exert a powerful grip especially on those who have never made peace with their own fragility and therefore persecute fragility in others. In *The Simpsons*, the first time Martin Prince—top of the class and usually the victim of bullies—takes part in a group act of locking a boy in the girls' changing room, he says that one of the things he enjoyed most was "the fact that it wasn't me." Participation in collective violence offers protection and a sense of visibility, even when one is merely a spectator.

The educator of evil knows how to manipulate young people's emotions through concrete rites: stealing the scarf of an opposing fan, beating up the boy selling lighters on the street corner, setting fire to a phone booth. This is one possible lens through which to interpret bullying and vandalism.[2]

"Friendship," "solidarity," "camaraderie"—these are the words that educators of evil propose and instill. Of course, it is a one-sided friendship, a solidarity among equals, a camaraderie "based on pushing and shoving," as Adorno already denounced. But the feeling of friendship—already compromised by its commodified use on platforms like Facebook—is further distorted within groups where your "friends" are in fact your bosses: cowardly figures who remain hidden while you commit the act that will elevate you in their "friendship" (which is never gratuitous or disinterested, as real friendship is).

If we do not fully grasp this dark fascination, it becomes difficult to propose real alternatives. Speaking of remembrance trips, Primo Levi—shortly before his tragic death—suggested a pause for reflection: the fact that young people sometimes behave at extermination camps in ways wholly inappropriate to the place, even mocking, should force us to think. It is not a paradoxical provocation to say that a young person who participates in a "journey of memory" might become a neo-Nazi—or at least reinforce a racist orientation already present. We must always remember the extraordinary seduction of evil, especially for adolescent minds. There is no doubt that the SS, Nazi hierarchy, and Nazism as a whole can arouse admiration and identification in very young people.

The abyss exists. It is part of the mountain; it constitutes its charm and its risk. In itself it has no ethical or moral dimension. Teaching people to look into the abyss without being fascinated by it is difficult—but it is the only weapon against those who use the abyss to drag the innocent into it, under the pretext of education, which is always an instrument ready for any use.

---

NOTES

[1] F. Langer, *Children and the Dagger*, Garzanti, Milan, 2001, p. 126.
[2] See R. Mantegazza, *From Bully to Bully: Letter to a Violent Boy from a Former Violent Boy*, Milan–Udine, Mimesis, 2020.

## 8. PAVED ROADS: THE TEMPTATION OF THE EASY PATH

> *Happiness that we only know how to watch, to wait for, to seek already made,*
> *as though it were the perfect anagram of ease,*
> *cheating by a single letter.*
> (Francesco Guccini, *Ballando con una sconosciuta*)

"These kids don't make an effort. They want everything ready-made. They have no sense of sacrifice. They don't know how to struggle. They don't read, they don't write, they can't do maths."

Like all clichés, these statements contain a grain of truth. Yet that grain is drowned in trivialization, endlessly repeated until it becomes stereotypical and therefore fundamentally false. The problem, as so often happens, is that what originates with adults is blamed on the young. Adults would do well to look at themselves first.

In ten years, two hundred bookshops have closed in Rome. Most were small, some family-run; even large chains are struggling, and online booksellers survive largely thanks to other, less demanding products. As one commentator observed:

> "In Italy, books are treated like sacks of potatoes. They are taxed like sacks of potatoes, sold like sacks of potatoes, and marketed like sacks of potatoes. But a book is not a sack of potatoes (with some exceptions), and bookshops—together with schools and libraries—are the last bastion supporting reading. They have a cultural and strategic function that cannot be ignored."[1]

Certainly, institutions must respond. But can everything be resolved institutionally? How many votes would a mayoral candidate gain by placing culture—bookshops, neighbourhood libraries, cultural associations—and schools at the top not only of their agenda but of their budget? How many citizens who protested indignantly over the transfer of a millionaire footballer have taken to the streets in solidarity with booksellers?

"18.5% of those interviewed last year did not read a book, practice sport, visit a museum, exhibition, or archaeological site, nor attend theatre, cinema, or a concert. In southern Italy, this rises to 28.2%."[2]

A book is not an easy instrument; perhaps it is not an instrument at all, but an environment. It is a space-time in which to lose oneself, to move with cautious enthusiasm. It is a way of experiencing culture and knowledge differently; a distinct mode of inhabiting the world.

It is time—time of suspension and ecstasy. Time of waiting, in an age that no longer knows how to wait, where everything must happen immediately, at the click of a mouse. Who has time to wait for Edmond Dantès to carry out his long revenge? Reading is quantitatively and qualitatively significant time. Above all, it is useless time: time freed from the anxiety of profit. In Kantian terms, reading is an end without ulterior purpose. A book, like any work of art, is an end in itself; like any object of love, it is loved for its own sake.

Such experience is dangerous in a society increasingly organized around profit and utility. It leaves a splinter in the conscience of those who believe that every service must have a price. It proposes another relationship with everyday life—both within it and outside it. An ancient ecstasy (*ek-stasis*), which Machiavelli described:

> "When evening comes, I return home and enter my study; at the door I remove my daily clothes, covered in mud and dust, and put on royal and courtly garments. Properly dressed, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, lovingly received, I feed on that food which is mine alone and for which I was born. There I am not ashamed to speak with them and ask them the reasons for their actions; and they, in their humanity, answer me. For four hours I feel no boredom; I forget all troubles; I do not fear poverty; I am not frightened by death; I wholly transfer myself to them."

Yet in 2019 millions of Italians were captivated by the feud between two television personalities involving fake marriages, invented children, promised and denied fees. Millions hung on their words as though witnessing high drama—despite the script being so transparently fabricated as to be almost moving in its falseness.

This is not about moralizing in the name of democracy or invoking censorship. It is about recognizing that such programming is intellectually degrading—an insult to intelligence. Behind the proliferation of reality shows, talk shows, and celebrity competitions lies a systematic process of cultural lobotomization.

The path proposed to us is no longer even a path. It requires no walking. It resembles a Star Trek transporter that dematerializes our neurons and instantly delivers us into the realm of trash culture. The metaphor is scarcely exaggerated. The real casualty of semi-culture is time: time for reflection, learning, growth; time to watch *2001: A Space Odyssey* for the sixth time and discover something new each viewing; time to savor the vastness of *War and Peace* or the lightning brevity of *The Metamorphosis* without glancing at one's watch or smartphone.

Everything appears simple—etymologically, everything reduced to "one fold." Those who promise to "explain" reality arrive armed with a PowerPoint presentation, ready to unfold the single easy truth. Assessment becomes selecting one—and only one—correct box. Learning is reduced to consuming what is placed in the trough: light, digestible content swallowed without asking what it is or why it should be ingested.

The *per aspera ad astra* path—so unfashionable among adults that their complaints ring hollow when they see young people rejecting it—makes sense only if it truly leads *ad astra*. If it leads nowhere, it is pathetic. If knowledge leads to something less than happiness, dullness may seem preferable. The lowering of standards in school and culture has provided oxygen to the administered idiocy of talk shows, talent shows, and reality television.

Today's roads are neither rugged mountain trails nor even paved streets; they are virtual highways of information technology: smooth, without potholes, without queues at toll booths. Self-referential highways—"relentless roads to nowhere."[3] Roads that fold in upon themselves and can be traveled without time.

But since "love fills the capillaries very slowly, mediating reason with a new feeling,"[4] the result of ease is unhappiness. In a memorable interview on Swiss television,[5] Paolo Villaggio argued that Fantozzi's perpetual unhappiness was the price he paid for conforming to social expectations. Italians loved him because they recognized that their apparent happiness was only a veil.

A veil that must be lifted to reveal the deception beneath. Those who sell happiness at a discount are frauds. Happiness is inseparable from truth. The bond between truth and happiness is the only authentic reason to pursue the former: no profound truth fails to lead toward happiness—or at least to allow its glimmers to shine through.

The true guide, the true companion, seeks to form men and women who ask the question of happiness. Perhaps not necessarily happy individuals, but individuals who do not exclude, in advance, the possibility

of happiness here and now—a land of "milk and honey." A pedagogy that does not raise the question of happiness has no reason to exist.

It is difficult. Certainly. Because doing difficult things is always difficult:

> It is difficult to do difficult things:
> to speak to the deaf,
> to show the rose to the blind.
> Children, learn to do difficult things:
> to give a hand to the blind,
> to sing for the deaf,
> to free the slaves who believe themselves free.[6]

---

NOTES

[1] Claudio Morici, *Il delitto perfetto: indagini sulla chiusura delle librerie a Roma*, "Internazionale," 8 June 2019.
[2] Christian Raimo, "L'Italia divisa tra chi legge e chi no," "Internazionale," 9 January 2016.
[3] Francesco Guccini, *Quello che non*.
[4] Enrico Ruggeri, *Rien ne va plus*.
[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sv8oiLC4hSs
[6] Gianni Rodari, *Lettera ai bambini*.

## 9. Beyond the summit

*It is there.*
*Let me take a step on my own.*
(Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*)

At a certain point, you arrive. The goal grows nearer on the horizon; all that remains is to cross the final gully, the last ridge, those final meters that make you question the wisdom of the undertaking—and then it is done.

An educational program must reach its objectives. Perhaps at different paces, perhaps appreciating detours, but those who educate must strive to achieve what they have planned. Too often educational planning is carried out half-heartedly and therefore fails to bear fruit; too often the aims of educational intervention are expressed in vague, generic formulas. "Promoting socialization, increasing empathy, fostering integration, boosting self-esteem" are phrases that say nothing—just as defining the purpose of climbing the Matterhorn as "reaching the top of a cone of stone" says nothing.

Goals must be defined precisely. Educational objectives must be designed in relation to the person being accompanied. They are never fixed once and for all; they must be rethought, reinterpreted, reshaped according to the path taken. But once a sufficiently shared definition has been reached, the educator's task is—and must be—to guide the learner toward those ends.

When objectives are not achieved, excuses are readily available: it is the school's fault, the family's fault, the internet's fault, society's fault. The art of education consists in proposing attainable goals, with different timelines and sometimes different paths, because reaching them is the only way to know how to begin again. It also consists in taking responsibility for summits not reached. It is not the mountain's fault if the mountaineer is stopped halfway by a storm; it is the mountaineer who failed to listen to the mountain while planning the ascent.

One shudders slightly when hearing expressions such as "individualized teaching" or "personalized learning plan," often reduced to acronyms like PDP—terms that risk becoming bureaucratic labels. Teaching is always individualized; there is no such thing as teaching "for the class" or "for the group." At most, there is teaching with the group. Educational plans must always be personalized; otherwise, they become mere formal documents produced to generate paperwork for ministries and authorities.

Upon reaching the summit, it is time to rethink the path taken. At the end of his journey, Dante begins to write; he closes one path to open another. The educator must not only accompany the conclusion but must use the conclusion as a lens through which to reread the beginning. The end illuminates initial aspirations, difficulties encountered, achievements realized, and goals once deemed unreachable.

Educational stories are too often closed in haste. Students are greeted quickly, farewells rushed. Not enough time is devoted to endings, because the time of ending is also the time of death—and death frightens us. So we hurry to say goodbye and move on.

I chose to take part in the 2020 final examinations and had the privilege of serving as chair of the examination board. The impression was truly that of standing on a summit: extraordinary adolescents, elegant and moved, who gave back to the school perhaps even more than the school—though excellent—had given them. Deep conversations in which students reflected on their growth within that institution, even through languages, even through mathematics, even through Dante. Moments of immense hope for a school that is not dead, that has not stopped, and that allowed these young people an extraordinary

ritual moment: seated on the summit with their teachers, gazing at the horizon and letting their eyes wander beyond the hedge "that excludes so much of the last horizon from view."

To educate means to lift someone up, to place them on one's shoulders so they may see farther than we can. It is an act of humility, a restraint of narcissism, because we want the world to continue and move forward. We want the student to surpass the teacher—and to do so precisely by standing on the teacher's shoulders and looking beyond a horizon we ourselves cannot see.

Educating means accepting that the summit these young people will reach will always be higher than ours, always farther away. We will glimpse it only from a distance, while "it is tinged with the blue color of distance."

The terrible months of the pandemic showed us what unritualized death means; they forced upon us the double anguish of abandonment without farewell. That was physical death, the torment of sudden loss. The ending of an educational path can also be a kind of death. It may be anticipated, planned, or it may not. A young person may choose to leave; tragedy may enter education, as it so often enters life with piercing pain. Not everything is programmable; not everything is plannable—fortunately—within educational processes.

We imagine an ending; we attempt to reach it. But often life has other designs. "We are a flock of larks; with a single shot we fall, / while we try to choose whether to fly north or south" (Roberto Vecchioni, *Canzone per Sergio*).

The strength of the educator lies in allowing these endings, these deaths, these unforeseen events to enter the path—not with the presumption of one who says, "I told you so," but with the humility of one who knows that if life is part of a larger design, we cannot plan beyond ourselves. We cannot push our arrogance so far as to cover entirely the project that transcends us or to define its goals exhaustively.

This is the educator's balancing act: planning within a greater plan; seeking certainties within uncertainty; identifying clear summits within a mountain range whose contours ultimately fade into distance.

Reaching the summit together does not mean confusing roles. It means sharing the thrill of the educational adventure. Student and teacher look one another in the eye at the end of the ascent and relive its emotions. Other peaks await. Other paths will open.

> "Below the ridge there are a few Swiss stone pines, spread out and quiet to withstand the wind and frost at two thousand meters. I will sit among the stones and say nothing, I promise. Just long enough to catch my breath, eat two squares of chocolate, feel it melt on my palate. There is no point in worrying about reaching the summit at this hour. In a moment, we will descend. For now, I just want to remain calm and look around me, all around me, from that peak down there still bathed in sunlight, with the two of us sheltered by a ridge."
>
> (Michele Serra, *Walter*)