



# THE RISK OF EDUCATION

Conference given by  
Monsignor Luigi Giussani





## THE RISK OF EDUCATION, CONFERENCE GIVEN BY MONSIGNOR LUIGI GIUSSANI

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I would like to begin to take a brief look at what I believe to be the fundamental factors of the problem of education. We cannot forget, especially since the Pope continuously refers to it in his addresses, that the problem of education is the primary one in a society that has a minimally evolved civil awareness. I remember that in the first years I was teaching religion, often in the disputes and dialectics in class, I would say, “Please, send us—us, the clergy—naked into the streets, take everything from us, but don’t take from us the freedom to educate.” I was distressed to see, in the years that followed—because thirty years have passed since I said that—that we have strived for everything, but have sacrificed freedom of education.

I would like to begin to hint at what I believe to be the fundamental traits of the phenomenon of education by quoting T. S. Eliot, because, along with Giacomo Leopardi, he is my favorite poet, so I read him almost every day:

Of all that was done in the past, [past: this is the first word in the  
problem of education], you eat the fruit,  
either rotten or ripe.  
And the Church must be forever building, and always decaying, and  
always being restored.  
For every ill deed in the past we suffer the consequence:  
For sloth, for avarice, gluttony, neglect of the Word of God,  
For pride, for lechery, treachery, for every act of sin.  
And of all that was done that was good, you have the inheritance.  
For good and ill deeds belong to a man alone, when he  
stands alone on the other side of death,  
But here upon the earth you have the reward of the good and ill that  
was done by those who have gone before you.

And all that is ill you may repair if you walk together in humble  
repentance, expiating the sins of your fathers;  
And all that was good you must fight to keep with hearts  
as devoted as those of our fathers who fought to gain it.  
The Church must be forever building, for it is forever decaying  
within and attacked from without;

For this is the law of life; and you must remember that while there is time of prosperity  
The people will neglect the Temple, and in time of adversity they will decay it.<sup>1</sup>

I wanted to quote this passage again firstly, as I was already impatient to mention before, to present the first fundamental factor of the phenomenon of education. The phenomenon of education is clearly a present; if it is a vestige of the past, then it is in the present that it can become education. It is a relationship in the present, but for educating.

A great Austrian theologian gave me what I hold to be the best definition of education I have found up to now. He said that education is introduction to reality as a whole. Now why does man need to be introduced to reality as a whole? Because, as the Pope keeps on repeating when he speaks of education or of culture, which is the same thing—because education is the main instrument of culture and in the end the two words have similar roots --, man has to be educated in order to become more himself, to be realized, for man does not realize himself unless by means of an encounter with something else.

Perhaps some of you recall Gide's *Symphonie Pastorale*—it's years since I went to see a film myself—in which Gide tells of a Protestant Pastor who is visiting his flock at Christmas and goes into a poor miserable hovel with its roof sagging, almost touching the ground. In that poor home, while he was speaking with its oldest inhabitants, he realized that what he had thought was a bundle of rags under the roof, was moving. His curiosity was aroused; he got up and went over, and there under a heap of rags, was an apparently 17-year-old girl. The girl was deaf and blind, and therefore mute. She had been born deaf and blind and had remained mute. The two inhabitants of the hovel were her grandparents. Her mother—their daughter—had given birth to that child and died in the process. At first, the grandparents had tried all sorts of ways to provoke a reaction from the child, but she was deaf and blind and did not perceive anything. Ignorant as they were, and tired, since they were very old, they had just left her there, in the same place, just keeping her fed. She had grown up like an animal. So the Protestant Pastor takes up the task of rehabilitating the girl.

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Choruses from "The Rock"*, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1963), 153-154.

Now the main point of the story is that man develops through relationships, through contact with something else; just as an “other” is necessary for man to exist from the start, it is equally as necessary for man to become true, more and more himself. Thus man is destined for the fulfilment of himself at the ultimate horizon. So, at least potentially, education must aim at introducing man to reality as a whole. But with what eyes, that is to say, with what criteria, that is to say, with what hypothesis of meaning will he approach this total reality, or this reality that he impacts? If there were no hypothesis of a meaning, or a previous point of view, how much less value would it all have! Simply upon coming into this building, how differently each one of us reacts to these masterpieces, according to the evolution of our awareness.

So, take the case of a parent; if we identify the parent, quite rightly, as the educator *par excellence*, by nature, on the basis of what terms will he introduce his child into relationship with reality? Without a proposal, the relationship with reality is purely reactive, it is like starting from zero, pure reactivity, instinctive or a matter of opinion; it will never be knowledge in the full sense of the word.

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**W**ith young people, I insist on using the scientific formula “working hypothesis,” because man comes to know things only on the basis of a working hypothesis. Man’s genius lies in finding the most adequate working hypothesis. Now, the working hypothesis on the basis of which a parent introduces his child into reality is called the past. It is the past. I said that the phenomenon of education is in action in the instant, in the present. But what is the present? Just an instant. The present instant is nothing. Its density, its richness, is the legacy of the past, including the previous instant. In the present instant the only thing that comes into play is that mysterious thing called freedom which manipulates in some way what comes from what was before, from the past.

I want to say that the first condition or the first fundamental factor of an education is the richness of tradition. Without this, education is either impossible or impoverished, flattened out. It is like an encephalogram that comes out as a flat line. The first factor is the wealth of tradition. This is the great, rich or poor, hypothesis, or point of view with which nature helps the new being in his impact with reality. The adventure into which existence launches the new being is like a dowry; it is not bare, naked or neutral; this dowry is called the past, and I insist on observing—Solzhenitsyn has a fine page in which he describes this, but it is a persistent idea he has—that a regime, in the negative sense of the word, a power that wants to dominate a people,

must first of all sever the people's relationship with the past, because a people that is not severed from the past, whose memory is not taken away, has the potential to judge and therefore to criticize and therefore a great potential for rebellion. On the contrary, the greater the richness of a proposed tradition, the more the person being educated has a conciliatory relationship with his elders, with his father and mother. The preservation of tradition, this means that the actor, the mediator of the offer, the father or mother, must be as aware as possible of what he or she is handing on. This awareness is not absolutely identifiable with the richness of tradition, because the greater part of this richness can be communicated without a critical awareness, but the more one is critically aware, the more explosive is the fascination that the tradition evokes. I believe that the confidence, the stability or the psychological balance of a person is strongly linked to the positivity of a proposal that re-engages the past, the tradition, for his new life that is vibrating.

A meaning in life, a meaning for life cannot but be first of all identified with a past or offered by a past. For the word tradition does not mean simply a store of information, of data, or of behavioural habits, but above all a meaning. So an education, first and foremost—I am ready to discuss this, I am willing to hear if I am perhaps exaggerating—an education is dependent and proportional to the devotion, to the fidelity to the past that the educator has and his awareness of it.

So this stresses what leads us to outline the second factor in the educative process: Tradition as a proposal is actuated by the figure of the educator. I believe there is no affirmation more absurd than that which maintains that a parent should not give his child ideas, feelings and values, that the child, as he grows, will have to choose for himself. There is nothing more nonsensical, nothing more unnatural, because a father and mother are such, not only because they give the child firstly milk and then more adult food as he grows, but also because they give themselves; otherwise the ideal would be to have a fool for a father and an idiot for a mother. It is clear that, as years pass, my esteem and devotion for my father and mother grow; the emotion in my memory, and my gratitude to them increases. This is because the more time passes, the more I realize what my father was for me, and what my mother was for me, and I discover a richness in them, in their words and attitudes, that I had never noticed, not for a long time. It often comes to mind how my mother would come to kiss me good night and tuck me in, and every night, before I left for the seminary, for at least 10 years, she would say, "Think of the children who have no father, think of the children who have no mother, who have no roof over their heads or a roof that leaks, and who get wet when it rains, those who have not eaten like you have today." How those short phrases said casually, without my understanding their value, just moving me sometimes,

developed my sense of relationships. I understood it ten years later, and I am indebted to my father for a certain sensitivity I learned from his behaviour.

Now, how much richer in awareness and content is the educator, his words, his attitude! In this regard, I would like to make an observation that I have seen provokes a public reaction. I believe that the main problem in the attitude of the educator is not that of coherence from the ethical point of view, because even a youngster, as he grows, once he has passed a certain point in adolescence, understands that his father is a man like the others, and the same goes for his mother. Incoherence in concrete, practical life arouses various feelings, like anger, if it serves, or almost contentment if it justifies, our own evasions. But there is something a youngster needs to see, and that is coherence of ideal in the educator. When parents insist on certain values and then, in the evaluation of things in life, in their attention, in their suggestions for the future, they never keep in mind the values they insist on, this generates a scandal, a wound that rarely can be healed, if not after a long time, I would say it's incurable. This is because the young person has first and foremost an enormous logical, rational need. If you insist on this ideal with me, and then in all your judgments this ideal has no effect, this destroys the esteem I have for you. Perhaps I am stressing personal reflections and experiences, but I am convinced of what I am saying. The educative subject must be as aware as possible and maintain an attitude towards his proposal that is above all an attitude of intellectual coherence, coherence in judgment and therefore adequate as regards the advising and evaluating of what he insists on. But it is destructive if the subject making the proposal is contradictory in the choice of his child's associates - that is to say, if parents propose certain ultimate values regarding meaning and the teacher in school or the companions they allow the child to spend time with, constantly have a different proposal to make. It would not be harmful or destructive if everything were tackled consciously and critically, for then it would be an aspect of the adolescent's introduction to reality as a whole. But the reasons must be clearly brought out. Everything that is censured provokes either unease and an unconscious but very active ferment deep in the heart, or else passes on contradictory things, leaving the heart at a loss before moral and ethical problems. So, as well as being aware of tradition, the educator must make a great effort in making sure that the people his children spend time with are in line with the concern that has been and will be fundamental in his relationship with his children. On this point I believe that every sacrifice must be made, because there is no greater threat than incoherence in the line of a proposal made to young people.

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I remember at Berchet High School, I was coming out and, in the entrance hall, I met a very distressed mother who was coming in. As soon as she saw me she came at me saying, “When my son was in his first year of studies in this school, he would come to church with me and say his prayers with me; now he is in his final year and he doesn’t want to go to church any more, and it’s your fault as his religion teacher.” I answered her, “In five years, how many times did you come to find out how your son was behaving with me, what judgments he had? How is it that you were never concerned about the group your son was frequenting? Above all, how is it that you were never concerned about what the philosophy teacher and the Italian teacher—[and I gave her their names]—were saying?”

Coherence of a proposal is a grave matter for the growth and the achievement of a personality. Paradoxically, only if a young person is helped to try out and verify deeply a coherent hypothesis for facing life, will he also be capable, out of honesty, in virtue of the real values acquired, to leave one road and follow another. But to face life or to allow one to face life without first of all being honest with what one was born with, that is to say, with tradition attentively and critically tackled—but I will explain this in a moment--, means once more making one’s own reactivity the criterion for living: “I like, I don’t like, I want, I don’t want, I think or I don’t think...”

I always tell young people that it’s quite right that a person is born with one of Aesop’s two knapsacks on his back—the reference to Aesop is purely external by the way--, and in this knapsack his parents or others in their place, since they love the child, put everything they believe useful into the bag; it’s quite right; it’s quite natural, as we said before. But there comes a time when nature itself, this same nature which makes a parent give a child what he feels to be right, pushes the child, or the adolescent by now, to take hold of the knapsack on his back and throw it out in front of him to look inside it. In English we use the word “problem” which means exactly “to throw before”; it comes from the Greek *pro ballo*. He rummages inside to see if what is there is worthwhile, and for this we use another word of Greek origin, crisis or critique (*kerisis*). It means to grasp the reasons, become aware of the reasons, and therefore the limitations or the lack of limitations of a proposal. If a person is not trained in this work, without having made the effort of training in this work, he will grow up to be reactive, with his reactivity being the ultimate criterion—physical or mental reactivity. But if the adult has not gone through this process in some way, or does not learn it when it comes to educating his child, then how will he be able to help the child? In this sense, freedom comes into play, first of all in the figure of the educator. In fact, freedom has first of all to come

into play in the attitude the educator takes up regarding the past. How sad is a society in which no one sets out to defend the possibility of communicating one's heritage to the new beings who emerge, because the newspapers, the television, the school, can all create a screen and an insulation that prevents a living contact with the values of the past.

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The publishers, *Jaca Book*, have produced a history of the Church and I have noted that all the adults who have bought the books for their children have read them and learned things they had never heard before. They are, in fact, a summary written for children, with illustrations for children. How can a Christian, a child of the Church who does not know the history of his own home, perceive the depth of the values that are proposed to him? It is impossible. Moreover, the nobility of one's blood, of his heart or his soul, can be seen first of all precisely in the sensitivity he has for the history of his own family.

Now I want to speak of the third factor that comes into play in the educative process and it is above all because of this third factor that we normally call the fact of education a risk. It is the most dramatic aspect. I believe that many times, if not as a rule, there are few sources of delusion and pain that parents can have from their children like that suggested by this point of our discourse. I have already expressed it in other terms. What is proposed cannot simply be proposed. Simply to propose it is not education. One must in some way train, as far as you can, your own child to compare what he has been given with the problems life sets before him as it develops.

The experience that the growing child has, that is to say, the impact of reality with a subject is like a provocative presence which has the same root as the Christian word "vocation"; for one's vocation passes through the provocations coming from this impact. These provocations put questions before the young person which he must answer, and before which he must become aware of his responsibility, his capacity to respond.

Education must imply help in exemplifying these answers. After all, this is what we said earlier when we spoke of critique. We must always give the reasons for what we propose to them, and giving reasons is never an abstract phenomenon; it means showing how what I give you is able to make you face up to the more or less

dramatic, more or less impassioned questions, in an intelligent and cordial way, as a man, more than what you are told by a companion or what you were told by your teacher or what you see in a film or an article by Severino in *Corriere della Sera*.

Education is above all within this phenomenon which is called in technical and scientific terms “verification”-- the verification of a hypothesis. Now, in this verification, the adult’s effort is intensified, because he is the first to be tested; it is above all the adult who is tested because it is not automatic that he will be able to convince others with his own verifying action. This is because both the proposal and even the adult’s action that verifies the proposal stop on the threshold of the mystery of the freedom of the child or of the one being educated. Therefore, hoping against hope, hoping whatever the situation, continually grasping the opportunity for showing that what is maintained and given is reasonable, even when the reactivity of the child seems to be opposed to it, even when it seems that the child or the pupil is impermeable, even when he is obviously following other paths, you must persist in this fatherly and motherly, parental duty, with this contrition, with this tremendous disappointment, and overcome your distress. It is at this point that the risk of education is played out, because our task is to love, in other words, to propose and to accompany the young person in putting things to the test, so that the person on the receiving end of the proposal can grasp the reasons that we have grasped. This is love. Love cannot be demanding obedience on the basis of a persuasion, a conviction not yet formed.

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**M**an, and therefore your child, is a free relationship with destiny, with the Infinite, with God, with truth and goodness. He is a free relationship, and so the way the search for destiny will ensue in him is mysterious. This can never suspend our untiring attention, our untiring proposal and assistance. You can do what you will, but someone with no will power cannot be educated beyond a certain limit. To conclude, I will quote another page by Eliot:

It is hard for those who have  
never known persecution,  
And who have never known a Christian,  
To believe these tales of

Christian persecution.  
It is hard for those who live  
near a Bank  
To doubt the security of their money.  
It is hard for those who live near a Police Station  
To believe in the triumph of violence.  
Do you think that the Faith has conquered the World  
And that lions no longer need keepers?  
Do you need to be told that whatever has been, can still be?  
Do you need to be told that even such modest attainments  
As you can boast in the way of polite society  
Will hardly survive the Faith to which they owe their  
significance?  
Men! polish your teeth on rising and retiring;  
Women! polish your fingernails:  
You polish the tooth of the dog and the talon of the cat.  
Why should men love the Church? Why should they love  
her laws?  
She tells them of Life and Death, and of all that they would  
forget.  
She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where  
they like to be soft.<sup>2</sup>

This is the triumphalism of the authentic Christian. But I read this passage in order to affirm that every personal history is as if it were begun over again. Despite our heritage, the true point of drama, the point of understanding and therefore of decision—because in order to understand you have to decide to understand—always presents itself as if it were the first time (that of Adam and Eve), and the great tenacity or, rather, the strength of character of the educator is this indefatigable, continuous reproposal.

Just as the finest expression in the Bible says—as far as I'm concerned, also because I need it—“In spem contra spem,” hoping against all the evidence.

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<sup>2</sup> T.S. Eliot 160-161.

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I wanted simply to say what I think are the fundamental factors of the whole educative process. First, the value of tradition, which is the first factor targeted and censured where a power dominates in society, in the family, in civil society, and, paradoxically, in religious society. At times, it can happen that ecclesiastical society, if it is lived as a will for power, censures its own history. Second, the figure of the educator, which is the place where tradition becomes conscious and becomes a proposal, but it is a proposal that must offer companionship in its impact, and therefore in the comparison, and in the comparison show the reasons for the proposal itself. But this, the third factor, that is to say, the proof, the verification, is not mathematical; it is not a matter of logic; it stops short, as I said, on the threshold of the person's freedom. Here lies the drama of the risk of education. But whatever be the immediate outcome of your own loving passion (because, as the Pope says, there is no demonstration of love for mankind like the educative commitment), the living proposal, in other words the "I" of the educator, must be untiring, an "I" that is not halted by any circumstances of space or of time, nor therefore of age, nor by any exterior situation, nor any kind of response.