

encased myself in. It was Charles who broke through that self-imposed protective fluidity of unconsciousness I had tried to drown myself in out of fear and timidity. . . . It was his—I can put it no other way—beneficent fury that freed me into the world. (170–171)

With this Rumaker began to find his voice. The breakthrough was a story called “The Truck.” After Rumaker read it to the workshop, Olson declared it a breakthrough, and his friend Tom’s cheeks were “grinning red with pleasure” (420). An “additional wonder” was the reaction of Jorge Fick, an advanced student who had played the role of “prime tormentor,” hazing the green Rumaker over the years (526). What struck Rumaker was “the agog look on Fick’s face, like he’d seen a miracle (which I expect to everyone else, after so long a time, including me, it truly was)” (420).

If we think of this moment only as arriving at competence in a craft after a shaky start, then the word “miracle” is humorous hyperbole, as in “it took you long enough.” I prefer an Arendtian reading, recalling the concept of natality evoked in the epigraph. “It is in the nature of a beginning,” Arendt writes, “that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before.” Arendt reads this capacity to initiate, this “fact of natality” as a kind of everyday miracle, a “miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin.”<sup>139</sup> So we could say that Rumaker has been improving his writing and that it has now attained a certain level of quality. Bravo. But this is to misunderstand the revelatory nature of action, as if what natality primarily disclosed was “‘what’ somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings.”<sup>140</sup> On our Arendtian reading, the “The Truck” marks a turning point not because it shows *what* Rumaker can do as a writer, but because it has sprung from *who* he is in a way that his earlier work did not. Rather than see Rumaker as moving from novice to advanced writer, we can read this literary education as an allegory of arrival in the spirit of Rice and Arendt. Where we leave off the story, Rumaker has arrived . . . as a beginner.

#### WHO IS THE FORMATIVE EDUCATOR?

The adolescent striving that makes itself felt over the whole world today needs to be met, needs to be given reality by an act of confrontation. Confrontation must be personal. Adults are needed if adolescents are to have life and liveliness. Confrontation belongs to containment that is non-retaliatory,

without vindictiveness, but having its own strength. . . . Let the young alter society and teach grown-ups how to see the world afresh; but, where there is the challenge of the growing boy or girl, there let an adult meet the challenge. And it will not necessarily be nice.

—D. W. Winnicott<sup>141</sup>

We are exploring Black Mountain College with the aim of expanding our imagination of higher education. To be clear, imagination does not mean puffy white clouds on a sunny day. That is fantasy. I understand imagination precisely as the ability to get past our wishes and clichés to take in more of the real.<sup>142</sup> Imagination therefore requires concreteness and specificity. Think of George Orwell in the *Road to Wigan Pier*, walking deeper and deeper into a mineshaft so that with the increasing strain on his back and tax on his lungs he might begin to imagine a miner's day.<sup>143</sup> Imagination is not make-believe but belief-testing. We seek to notice the overlooked and learn to think the untimely because we are searching for a more adequate basis for our beliefs.

In the contemporary, corporatized multiversity, what tends to get overlooked are questions of meaning, purpose, and personhood. By contrast, I have pursued a formative conception of education as self-cultivation. With Rice as our chief guide, we have explored the layered nature of the self, the priority and difficulty of self-knowledge, the importance of pedagogical beginnings, and the agonistic dimensions of teaching. Rather than rush to the task of cultivation, we dilated the initial phases of the formative quest, looking at how learners—on the porch and the dining hall, in the theater class and the writing workshop—surface their selves, find their agency, and explore their natures. Rather than dive right into the advanced class in formative education, as it were, we followed Rice's advice to enroll in a pair of prerequisites, since the self must be known before being shaped and surfaced before being known. Finding yourself as a beginner, we concluded with Rumaker, is itself a worthy educational result.

I have called this story of delayed arrival an “allegory” to signal that what Rice offers is more evocation than systematic argumentation. Since Rice wrote no formal treatise on higher education, we must reconstruct his views from his autobiography and his conversations with Louis Adamic. However, what we have found in these broad strokes is that you can get to an interesting, untimely conclusion in just three short steps:

1. *Higher education is necessarily formative.* Below, I show how Rice substantiates this idea. Here, let me simply clarify one possible misunderstanding. To say that higher education is necessarily formative is not to idealize higher education. It is to reject the idea that we are simply transmitting discrete knowledge and information. It is to insist that personhood is always in play, that we are inevitably forming vision and values. That said, we may well be forming consumers, or people afraid to be alone with their own thoughts, or “rickety constructions of impulses ready to fall apart in what is called an ‘identity crisis.’”<sup>144</sup> It would not even be a contradiction to speak of forming amoral, hyperspecialized technicians. Since the various aspects of us are interconnected, our hyperspecialized curricula do not avoid shaping the whole person; they simply roll the dice about how this will work out.<sup>145</sup> To ignore the ethical question, What is it admirable to become?, is not to avoid educating character, but simply to do so indirectly and, in all likelihood, poorly. Educators, as I demonstrate below with Rice, cannot do without some working answer to this question of what it is worth growing into.<sup>146</sup>

2. *Formative education is inescapably transformative.* This adds a crucial corrective since “formative” alone suggests giving shape to something shapeless, like molding a ball of clay. Certainly by adolescence, if not well before, all significant learning entails processes of *unlearning*. We grow out of preferences, break old habits, let go of commitments, unravel comforting narratives, acknowledge blind spots, dispel illusions. To form is to transform. In saying this, we have to be careful not to gloss over the inevitably disorienting and painful aspects of unlearning. Letting go of commitments means mourning. Unraveling comforting narratives promises anxiety. Figuring out that the crucial fact has been parked in your blind spot is to be buffeted by waves of regret. You wouldn’t know this from “transformative learning,” a phrase that “gives us those nice bright colors.” Frisbee on the quad; an inspirational lecture; only moving upward on the new rec center’s rock climbing wall: this is transformative education, trademarked. The proper response to the trademarked variety is a vapid thumbs up. The natural response to actual transformation, we have been suggesting, is deep ambivalence.<sup>147</sup>

3. *Transformative education is inevitably agonistic.* As we have seen, this is especially true at the beginning of the process, when the formative educator must step into this charged field of ambivalence. Even as the educator

begins to befriend the green and growing self, he declares himself the opponent of those elements in the student that work to stall, trivialize, or sabotage the formative process. Transformative education is doubly conflictual, since it both triggers conflicts within the student and requires confrontation on the part of the educator. Because the self is a layered and protected thing, it must first be surfaced. And as Winnicott sums it up in the epigraph, “it will not necessarily be nice.”

Earlier, we followed Duberman in reading the scene on the porch as an expression of Rice’s commitment to “self-propulsion in learning.” And it is not wrong to see Rice as holding the progressive view that the student’s interest and agency are necessary conditions of formative, higher education. However, in order fully to understand Rice’s view, we need to distinguish between two species of progressive education. Rice embraced a version of what we could call the paradox of progressive education, namely that while it is true that (p) significant learning must be self-propelled, it is also true that (p’) self-propulsion must often be kick-started by another.<sup>148</sup> The tired debate between progressives and traditionalists turns on the first part of this equation. The traditionalist denies the progressive lemma (p), arguing that the process of learning should be driven not by the interest of the learner but by the will and judgment of the more knowledgeable teacher, who guides, instructs, and shapes. While progressives are right to insist on (p), their reluctance to consider the second part of the equation lends mainstream progressivism its untenably Romantic cast. Learners just happen to know what they need to learn and naturally desire to head in that direction. Teachers happily stand by to assist, serving as beneficent “guides on the side.” Motives are pure; collaborations are harmonious.

When we instead embrace the paradox, simultaneously affirming both p and p’, we forge a third way, one which I have elsewhere called “agonistic progressivism.”<sup>149</sup> If progressivism proper is a self-conscious, modern, European tradition, Rice (along with Richards, Olson, and others at Black Mountain) finds his place in a looser confederation that crisscrosses cultures and traditions, from the Zen koan to Oakeshott’s theory of liberal learning. Plato’s Socrates is an agonistic progressive and so is Nietzsche’s Schopenhauer, who serves as the model of the “true educator,” who reveals

to you the true original meaning and basic stuff of your nature, something absolutely incapable of being educated and molded, but in any case something fettered and paralyzed and difficult of access. Your teachers can be nobody but

your liberators. And that is the secret of all education; it does not provide artificial limbs, wax noses, or corrective lenses—on the contrary, what might provide such things is a parody of education. Education is rather liberation, the clearing away of all weeds, rubble, and vermin that might harm the delicate shoots.<sup>150</sup>

Agonistic progressives accept but then complicate the progressive mantra that we ought to follow the interest and lead of the student, adding that (1) pedagogy is often about creating the conditions in which this interest can emerge; and (2) following the lead of students often takes the form of directly leading them to the point where they can lead you.

\* \* \*

What is the nature of the search? you ask. Really it is very simple, at least for a fellow like me; so simple that it is easily overlooked. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. This morning, for example, I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a castaway do? Why, he pokes around the neighborhood and he doesn't miss a trick.

To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.

—Walker Percy<sup>151</sup>

Now let's circle back and consider this initial premise. What does it mean to say that higher education is necessarily formative? Rice's starting point is to reject as "mere head-stuffing" what usually passes for higher education, proposing instead an ambitious, holistic aim: "The job of a college is to bring young people to intellectual *and emotional* maturity."<sup>152</sup> It is important to add that Rice is not proposing an emotional supplement to intellectual development, as with the contemporary prescriptions of "social-emotional learning." As Adamic explains, Rice thought that the educated person was one in "whom intellectuality and emotions will be blended or synchronized into all-round, balanced intelligence," an "all-around human maturity."<sup>153</sup>

For some, this sort of formative mission statement may set off alarm bells. Who is Rice to say what it means to be mature? Does he claim to have an exact blueprint of the educated person? Rhetorical questions such as these immediately put us on the defensive. They are basically arguments *ad populum*, threatening you with the derision of the crowd if you dare to ask for a more explicit argument. We can accede or expose and challenge hidden premises. Another possible response is simply to see what happens if we

treat them as real questions. In this case, taken at face value and considered together, these two rhetorical questions actually prove quite manageable, even productive. I imagine the exchange along the lines of a Zen koan:

QUESTION: Who is Rice to say what it means to be mature?

ANSWER: He is a teacher. Those with no ideas on the subject had better choose a different line of work!

QUESTION: Does Rice claim to have an exact blueprint of the educated person?

ANSWER: I already said he was a teacher! Those with exact ideas on the subject had better choose a different line of work!<sup>154</sup>

A formative educator, I am suggesting, must find a middle course between abdication and dogmatism. To deny any knowledge of maturity and immaturity is to abdicate the role. To claim specific knowledge of the end-state is to lapse into dogmatism.

We can develop this idea further with a thought experiment. If we were seeking to hire a formative educator, what would we list as the key qualifications? If I had to boil it down to three, they would be (1) awareness of one's students as distinctive persons; (2) an understanding of what formative resources (traditions, practices, ideas, texts, artworks, etc.) are likely to spark and enrich their ongoing conversations with themselves and others; and (3), skill in bringing these materials to life. Clearly, this is not the usual resumé; and it may well be that our usual hiring practices are ill-suited to fathoming intersubjective and intrasubjective qualities such as dialogicality and soul. But that is precisely the point. We are not usually searching for formative educators but for instructors (or for scholars who happen to be decent instructors). Though we sometimes wax poetic about college teaching, we operate according to the prosaic grammar of instruction: teaching is transmission to students (*en masse*); the curriculum is content to be "covered"; learning is acquisition. By contrast, formative education demands a dialogical stance (orienting to the concrete person who is your interlocutor), a hermeneutic sensibility (understanding persons and traditions as formed in interaction), and existential imagination (seeing how the subject matter illuminates what sorts of lives there are to be lived and what makes them worthwhile).<sup>155</sup>

Let's push this contrast even further. While instructors can be overheard talking about what they will "cover," formative educators are more likely

to be wondering how they can create the kind of experience described by Kafka:

I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good Lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books, and the kind of books that make us happy are the kind we could write ourselves if we had to. But we need the books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us. That is my belief.<sup>156</sup>

I like to imagine this quote emblazoned over an image of an axe driven into a block of ice, hung next to the compulsory library poster showing a young reader sunk into a beanbag chair as fuzzy and lethargic as the imperative this is meant to illustrate: "Find yourself in a book." Indeed, we could read Kafka here as searching for an axe for the frozen sea inside this cliché. As if his own belief about reading lay trapped and hidden under the ice, Kafka searches frantically, lurching from metaphor to metaphor. A book is a knife, then a hammer. Reading is disaster, banishment, suicide. OK, so maybe this isn't the right passage for our college brochures. But many of us will resonate with Kafka's gratitude for those books (and this surely also applies to nonverbal works of art) that *open us up*, that break through the hastily erected drywall pocketing our fears, shames, wounds, sorrows. Once we regain contact with ourselves, opening up flows of affective traffic (in this open-plan architecture of the inner life), we also find ourselves more open to the world around us.

If you find Kafka's hermeneutics of calamity a step too far, I ask you only to accept this more modest point: formative education founders unless one knows one's students and how to arrange a live encounter with what might move them. So, I posit these three necessary conditions: the ability to perceive in turn the student as person, personhood as quest, and culture as conversation. But are they sufficient? Indeed not, as this resume omits what might very well be the first principle of formative education. It is so basic that it often escapes notice; or perhaps we omit it because it sounds too personal. What I have in mind is this: formative educators must themselves exemplify this quest to understand, cultivate, and enact oneself.<sup>157</sup> This is to say that what catalyzes the educational process is simultaneously

the achieved personhood of the teacher and the fact that they continue, as Jonathan Lear puts it, to strive “to live non-defensively with the question of how one should live.”<sup>158</sup> To some extent, they must embody the “all around human maturity” of which Rice speaks. Just as crucial: they must be tuned in to what Walker Percy describes as simply “the search.” In what might count as his version of the formative educator want ad, Rice describes someone who exemplifies both achieved and ongoing self-cultivation:

A good teacher is always more a learner than a teacher, making the demand of everyone to be taught something. . . . A man who never asks himself any questions had better not try asking others. . . . A teacher must have something of humor, a deeply laid irony, and not be a cynic. In the center of his being he should be calm, quiet, tough. He must have in him the principle of growth; like a student, a sense of justice and a capacity for dejection.<sup>159</sup>

In sounding this idea, Rice joins a minor tradition stretching from Plato’s Socrates through Nietzsche and Emerson to more recent critics of scholarly formation.<sup>160</sup> I think of Alfred North Whitehead’s declaration that he had written *The Aims of Education* as “a protest against dead knowledge, that is to say, against inert ideas,” explaining,

The students are alive, and the purpose of education is to stimulate and guide their self-development. It follows as a corollary from this premiss, that the teachers also should be alive with living thoughts.<sup>161</sup>

Rorty is another member of this loyal opposition against the depersonalization of teaching, writing that “the only point in having live professors around instead of just computer [simulations] is that students need to have freedom enacted before their eyes by actual human beings.”<sup>162</sup> To this I would add: not only freedom but also the work of integrating one’s diverse dimensions into a livable unity of character and outlook. In genuine higher education, Rorty argues, we find charged interactions between persons-in-process: “the sparks that leap back and forth between teacher and students . . . [connect] them in a relationship that has little to do with socialization and much to do with self-creation.”<sup>163</sup>

As I have suggested, the formative educator cannot operate without some ideas about what it means to be educated, about what it is worth growing into. But we now add that these must be lived ideas. The educator must embody the ideas of maturity that she espouses. This brings me to



my second koanic response to the skeptic. On my view, maturity involves a growing awareness of the limits of your knowledge. This is why I suggest that we gently counsel out of the profession those who claim to have the final word on what it is admirable to become. The true formative educator works not from a template, a definition of the mature and complete human being, but from specific intimations of disavowal and disunity. From particular vantage points, we assay our gaps and deformations; from there, we essay revisable visions of our fuller integrity.

This is a tall order, maturity without fixity, knowledge without knowingness. However, as Rice explains in his autobiography, he found just such an educator in his high school Greek teacher, John Webb. Rice attended (and after college returned to briefly teach at) the independent Webb School in Bell Buckle, Tennessee, founded by brothers Sawney and John. While they were ostensibly co-principals, Sawney ran the show, asserting ever greater control over the years. Rice describes Sawney as a man who “once had an active mind, and an intuitive knowledge of boys” but “grew to be a tyrant, filled with his own glory.”<sup>164</sup> Whereas Sawney inspired mainly fear, Rice reports that it was difficult to name the feeling he felt for John since “love is too narrow” and “worship too wide” (217). Rice develops his portrait of John through a running contrast with Sawney:

“Sawney was an actor; John Webb was a dramatist. The persons of his plays were ideas” (212).

Prone to “droning along,” Sawney turned even his own ideas into tired quotations; John “was incapable of acting, that is, repeating, and peculiarly unable to act the parts that he himself had created, for he knew that language could die and meaning with it, and a thing said three times is no longer true” (212).

“John Webb never thought he knew enough; Sawney read the daily paper and became a prophet” (218).

“Sawney accepted without question the dominant beliefs of the South in his time, and of America” (220); John would take an idea, “if serious . . . and begin working on it, to reject or remake it for himself” (212).

“Sawney was a disciplinarian of outward order, and frightened or shamed the young into a similitude of goodness; John Webb’s was an inner discipline, of the mind and spirit, grounded in freedom” (211).

A line of Sawney’s, “often repeated, was, ‘We would like to develop both character and scholarship here’”; John Webb responded, “I don’t understand. To me they are the same” (220).

To be sure, Rice has positive things to say about pedagogy at Webb. Decades later, when he was touring progressive schools and listening to “breathless accounts of the latest thing,” he found that the Webb of his student days—which had fused the traditional curriculum with a progressive emphasis on play and student-led activities—could match their innovations “point by point” and “go them . . . two better, for the school had both order and intellectual backbone” (205). For Rice, though, the impact of pedagogical methods pales in comparison to the importance of the example of robust personhood that he found in his teacher. What moved Rice was John Webb’s integration of intellect and character; his independent-mindedness; his ability to bring out the felt importance, the drama, of ideas; his irritation at deadness and cliché; his combination of freedom and discipline. Webb evinced “soul action,” the ongoing effort to meet the world in its complexity by developing one’s diverse dimensions into a dynamic whole.

This portrait of Webb helps us put flesh on Rice’s idea of “intellectual and emotional maturity.” As Rice explains, it is all too easy for teachers, for any of us, “to grow old in harness” (215). The trick is really growing up, which Rice defines as holding on to genuine youth while adding in genuine maturity. Fearful of losing youth, we may cling to it; or we may forget to bring it along as we rush out the door. For Rice, this accounts for two common types of teacher: the “gray-haired youth” (215) who “just wants to be “one of the boys” (215); and the “top sergeant” (216) who equates maturity with the disposing of all “childish things.” If the former is mired in “sentimentality,” the latter is prone to “sadism” (215). “Untroubled by doubt or even thought,” the top sergeant holds that “It doesn’t matter what a boy studies, just so he hates it” (216). John Webb was living proof that one could navigate this dilemma without impaling oneself on either horn. In Webb, Rice found neither a cynic who had lost hope nor a sentimentalist who had traded it for fantasy, but someone still animated by the genuine article. His belief that “youth is the seed of a secret future” (216) made him immune to the cynic’s nonchalant despair; his awareness of “tragedy” (217) and “the limits of his knowledge” (217) made him unwilling to sugarcoat reality.

Thus, we return to the idea that a formative educator must find a middle course between abdication and dogmatism. To deny any knowledge of maturity and immaturity is to abdicate the role. To claim specific knowledge of the end-state is to lapse into dogmatism, giving way to the immature

need for fixed templates just when students are looking for models of the mature attempt to combine commitment and open-mindedness, to make judgments, as Arendt puts it, “without a bannister.”<sup>165</sup> Thus, as difficult as it may be to define or attain, maturity is a concept that educators cannot do without.

And yet it was just this concept, this ethical-existential ideal, that Rice found missing as he made his way through college and grad school and into academia. Formal education, he concluded, tended on the whole to miseducate the emotions. There he found “ailing children” whose “heads are crammed with facts.”<sup>166</sup> He found that the imagination, “the chief distinction of man” receives at best “meager training.”<sup>167</sup> Instead of a vital, poetic curriculum in Rainer Maria Rilke’s sense, a “high inducement to the individual to ripen, to become something in himself,” Rice found mainly “a boneyard.”<sup>168</sup> He found that “while university students were older in years, they were in no other way, only more hardened.”<sup>169</sup> In graduate school, he found not a formative education to ripen the scholarly imagination—to feel one’s way into the human dimensions of the topic, to perceive with freshness and clarity, to pose profound questions, to judge acutely and justly—but rather a narrow training for “technicians.”<sup>170</sup> And in his several forays into academia, Rice found that this training had been all too successful. Instead of grasping the world with Deweyan “chest knowledge”<sup>171</sup>—where knowledge is intertwined with conduct, where thinking is illuminated by imagination and enlivened by feeling, where knowledge of self and other are intertwined—academics learn to distance and desiccate:

Research is the report of what one has found out rather than of what one knows. The area of exploration is outside oneself, and, if not already dead, must be deadened . . . just as the herbalist cannot recognize a living specimen but must have it first pressed and dried.<sup>172</sup>

This points toward an important specification of Rice’s claim that higher education is necessarily formative, namely that a process of humane, holistic formation must reckon with the dead spots in experience. Rice puts it eloquently:

There is a technique to be learned, a grammar of the art of living and working in the world. Logic, as severe as it can be, must be learned; if for no other reason, to know its limitations. Dialectic must be learned: and no feelings spared, for you can’t afford to be nice when truth is at stake. The hard, intractable facts

of science must be learned, for truth has a habit of hiding in queer places. These are the pencil, the brush, the chisel. . . . But they are not all. There are subtle means of communication that have been lost by mankind, as our nerve ends have been cauterized by schooling. The arts, especially the performing arts, are more and more valuable in such restorations. For these nerves must be renewed, in both ourselves as faculty and in the students who come to us.<sup>173</sup>

This winding, hortatory passage draws together several of the themes we have been tracing. We ought to understand higher education as an existential project, Rice suggests, as a contribution to the “art of living.” But for this very reason, the arts must be central: formative education must be aesthetic education. But not only this. In the final line, Rice returns to the idea that formative educators must themselves exemplify the quest to understand, cultivate, and enact oneself. They must be seekers. When we combine these ideas, we derive a profound demand on the formative educator. Educators must tend to their own cauterizations, grapple with the dead spots in their experience, work to break through their own calloused layers.

★ ★ ★

And this freedom, this ripeness of self, is the indispensable element in all true teaching, simply because it speaks so compellingly to those who hunger to be free—that is presumably to all.

—William Arrowsmith<sup>174</sup>

Here, as in so many areas of educational discourse, we are beset by platitudes: lifelong learning; teachers as learners; cutting-edge research; sabbatical as a space for renewal. Grains of truth notwithstanding, such quarter-thoughts beg the interesting questions: In what ways does the very concept of lifelong learning actually obscure the central concept of ethical formation, that of one’s life as a whole?<sup>175</sup> How exactly is the learning of teachers intertwined with the learning of students? What does it mean to set up an educational institution as a place of learning for the teacher? How might teaching be seen as an expression not merely of an active research program but of a formative quest? Are our slogans about the teacher as learner compatible with our practices of recruitment and promotion, our processes of faculty formation?

At Black Mountain College, faculty were not recruited according to the (now) common criteria of institutional pedigree, citation indices, grant dollars, and the like. To be sure, the Black Mountain faculty included its

share of pathbreaking thinkers (e.g., John Cage and Buckminster Fuller), sought-after humanities scholars (theater critic Eric Bentley would go on to teach at Columbia and Harvard after BMC; the philosopher Bill Levi taught at Dartmouth and Chicago before coming to BMC; art critic Clement Greenberg would go on to lecture at Princeton, Yale, and Bennington), and accomplished scientists (the physicist Natasha Goldowski joined the faculty after working on the Manhattan Project and teaching at Princeton; Max Dehn was the first mathematician to solve a Hilbert problem). But this was largely unintentional. Obviously, they wanted people who knew their stuff, but what they were really after were faculty who exemplified what Rice called “the principle of growth.” BMC sought scholar-teachers who saw living and learning as inseparable and came to BMC to be part of a community in which all were seeking self-knowledge and greater “intellectual and emotional maturity.” And it succeeded in attracting much more than its share of scholars who remained liberal learners, of unhardened souls who had managed to acquire disciplinary rigor and intellectual sophistication without abandoning their inner sophomores.<sup>176</sup>

However, since faculty formation does not end with graduate school, recruitment is not enough. Whether or not it ultimately proves educative or miseducative, there is no doubt that the informal curriculum of academic life—the culture of your department and university, the promotion and tenure process, the types of conversations of which you find yourself a part—is formative. The most striking feature of the academic culture at BMC may have been its robust interdisciplinarity. This was a small faculty, undivided by departments, jointly sharing the task of governance. As mentioned earlier, college meetings amounted in part to a running interdisciplinary seminar on the aims of higher education. Interdisciplinarity was also built into the formal curriculum. In the college’s first year, there were three

interdisciplinary seminars, each involving four instructors, all of whom attended every session. The intention was “to let students see the way in which an idea, a movement, a period of history, an art form, appear to a group of specialists, and also to get the student away from the habit of trying to please the teacher.”<sup>177</sup>

The seminars started at 8 p.m. and ran long as necessary “to follow an idea.”<sup>178</sup> One night in the creative writing seminar, a heated discussion “lasted until after midnight—and then broke out again the next morning at breakfast.”<sup>179</sup> We should not underestimate how rare and demanding this

sort of arrangement is. The four professors in one of these seminars were signing on to have their expertise (and worldviews) relativized weekly in front of their students and colleagues.

To the skeptic who sees this as not unlike sitting on a conference panel, we may respond that in fact the great majority of conferences insulate scholars in narrow, subdisciplinary cliques. If still not convinced, we might point the skeptic to another Black Mountain tradition: BMC faculty routinely attended each other's courses.<sup>180</sup> They were not attending to conduct teaching observations; they went as students.<sup>181</sup> Nor was this just a matter of professors refreshing their liberal education by attending an interesting lecture or two. In the contemporary university, the idea of the growth of the teacher is fixed by the image of the promotion and tenure ladder. At BMC, faculty were not climbing a ladder but walking a path: growth was not scripted but adventitious; not technical and professional but whole-personal and existential. The literature offers multiple stories of this teacher-as-learner ethos leading to true transformations. The most dramatic is probably that of MC Richards who arrived at Black Mountain a literature professor only to emerge as a translator, poet, and potter. She discovered pottery at Black Mountain, apprenticing herself to her colleagues, Karen Karnes and David Weinrib.

Formative education, we have said, requires a harrowing process of pecking away at the shell-self and risking exposure (recall that Rumaker described his emergence as feeling "without skin"). It requires an honest inventory of one's dead spots and a seeking out of experiences that can renew a sense of aliveness. And, we said, formative education cannot retreat to a convenient division of labor, with teachers providing and students receiving. Even as formative educators seek to assist in the self-formation of students, they must be actively devoted to their own formation, working through their own rigidities and narrow-mindedness. It is all for the good if formative educators evince admirable qualities, but key among these is the processural quality that Arrowsmith calls "a ripeness of self." What moves the student is not some finished thing in the teacher called character but the ongoing struggle to live fully and well. Recall this essay's epigraph. Richards (emphasis added) extols not perfect wide-awakeness but the "*resolve* to keep from going to sleep in the middle of the show." What catalyzes is the effort to restore feeling where we have grown numb, the struggle to reclaim freedoms given over to habit, deference, and convention. Thus, we can now add a fourth step to our syllogism: (1) higher education is formative; (2) formative education is

transformative; (3) transformative education is conflictual; and (4) educators must take their own medicine! educators must take their own medicine.

It is hard to find the language to describe this stance. Professional development is impersonal and suggests an easy, additive model; by contrast, “personal growth” misses its intellectual substance and professional import, taking us from the HR office to the self-help section of the bookstore. We could call it the humanism of the teacher, as long as we follow Victor Kestenbaum in distinguishing a humanism of vigilance from the ordinary “creedal humanism” that defines humanism as a commitment to some pre-specified set of values anchored in “‘models’ and ‘images’ of the human . . . taken to be distinctly or essentially human.”<sup>182</sup> For Kestenbaum, humanism is not a doctrine but a lived practice relying on the virtue of vigilance; “Humanism is vigilance become habitual.”<sup>183</sup> Vigilance in turn is the excellence that aids our efforts to “do justice to the phenomena” by enabling us to stay in the “play between presence and absence.”<sup>184</sup> Humanism as vigilance embodies a Jamesian commitment to a pluralistic universe, and therefore a stubborn resistance to “all the great single-word answers to the world’s riddle, such as God, the One, Reason, Law, Spirit, Matter, Nature, Polarity, the Dialectic Process, the Idea, the Self, the Oversoul.”<sup>185</sup> As Kestenbaum notes, this idea of vigilance goes beyond open-mindedness, at least as it is ordinarily construed as something focused on beliefs and reasons.<sup>186</sup> If the phenomena to which we are seeking to do justice are “a sunset, a recurring anxiety, a melody from a Haydn quartet, a two year-old’s hands,” then we cannot turn simply to overlooked “objections and counter-arguments” to save ourselves from myopic foreclosure.<sup>187</sup> Vigilance is not narrowly cognitive but holistically human, seeking “to presence these phenomena . . . through absent images, moods, feelings, attitudes, memories, reveries, musings, sensibilities, impressions, etc.”<sup>188</sup> This helps us correct what might be a cognitivist bias in our stress on interdisciplinarity, in which we entertain rival disciplinary framings of a question or claim. And it brings us back to the aesthetic dimension of the quest to stay in contact with our growing edge.

At BMC, then, faculty embraced the idea that they themselves had to join this “agonizing, dangerous enterprise to dig down into yourself.” The story that best captures this ethos is that of Buckminster Fuller’s acting debut. Fuller was a core faculty member in the BMC summer institutes of 1948 and 1949, where he worked with students in constructing the first self-supporting version of his geodesic dome.<sup>189</sup> In the classroom and the dining

hall, Fuller was known as a brilliant talker, dazzling students with his “passion and pace” as he espoused, in marathon sessions, a novel, integrated theory of everything.<sup>190</sup> His colleagues (Elaine and Willem DeKooning, John Cage, Merce Cunningham) found his conversation equally stimulating. The director Arthur Penn—a student who would later join the faculty—found Fuller’s talking “about building to be ‘one of the most exciting theatrical events’ he’d ever known.”<sup>191</sup>

But this was Bucky in his comfort zone, among students and friends. In his Black Mountain years, Fuller had yet to find the confidence that would lead to his being celebrated for his dynamic, unscripted public lectures. The turning point occurred in a quintessentially Black Mountain moment. Faculty not only attended each other’s classes but also collaborated on artistic productions. In the summer of 1948, a production of Satie’s *Ruse of the Medusa* (translated by MC Richards) was in the works, with Fuller recruited to play the Baron Medusa. Only things were not going so well. In rehearsal, the normally magnetic Fuller had become “gravely muted.”<sup>192</sup> Penn was called in to work with Fuller, and before long they discovered the root of the problem: Fuller revealed that he was stricken by the fear of “making a damn fool of myself.”<sup>193</sup> “He was just totally inhibited,” Penn recalls, “he was paralyzed.”<sup>194</sup>

Penn decided that the best therapy was to confront the fear head-on, designing a series of exercises to deliberately court embarrassment. Penn explains:

I thought, the only thing that I can do with him, that I know to do, is be more absurd about it than he could possibly be, so I just got down on the floor and started rolling around and laughing and, you know. I said, “Come on Bucky, come on!” and, before you know it, the two of us were rolling and laughing and yelling and screaming and jumping.<sup>195</sup>

As Penn recalls it, the ensuing transformation was remarkable to see: “It was like somebody was just throwing chains off.”<sup>196</sup> Fuller not only “blossomed” in the role of the Baron (John Cage called his performance “magnificent”); he turned some sort of corner in himself, later crediting Penn with helping him find his true voice, catalyzing his later success in his “thinking-out-loud” sessions.<sup>197</sup> Fuller the futurist had already dazzled with his dome. His animated hands-on explorations of the tetrahedron were spellbinding. “Bucky Fuller and his magic show,” Elaine DeKooning called it. “He looked like the Wizard of Oz to me,” Cunningham recalls, “just an



This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/15228.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15228.001.0001)

# Undeclared

## A Philosophy of Formative Higher Education

By: Chris Higgins

### Citation:

*Undeclared: A Philosophy of Formative Higher Education*

By: Chris Higgins

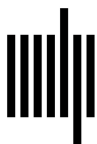
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/15228.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262377607

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2024

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

© 2024 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND license.

This license applies only to the work in full and not to any components included with permission. Subject to such license, all rights are reserved. No part of this book may be used to train artificial intelligence systems without permission in writing from the MIT Press.



The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Bembo Book MT Pro by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Higgins, Chris, 1967– author.

Title: Undeclared : a philosophy of formative higher education / Chris Higgins.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023028597 (print) | LCCN 2023028598 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780262547499 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262377614 (epub) |

ISBN 9780262377607 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Education, Higher—Aims and objectives.

Classification: LCC LB2322.2 .H487 2024 (print) | LCC LB2322.2 (ebook) |

DDC 378/.01—dc23/eng/20230814

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023028597>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023028598>