

THE WHITE DOVE

the need for the force of resistance as a necessary condition for the appearance of real unity.

I wish to illustrate what I am now speaking about by describing an experiment, an exercise, that any two people can try if they wish to verify the claim I am making about the immense and virtually unknown ethical significance of thinking together.

A REHEARSAL FOR MORALITY

I do not claim originality for this exercise—psychologists, counselors, and consultants have known about it for a long time, and I have been told that it or something very much like it was part of the ritual of dialogue in certain American Indian tribes. It is also possible that it lies near the heart of the ritualistic form of active debate that we now know exists in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and in many other religions throughout the world and throughout history. And we may well imagine that the whole dynamic rite of Talmudic argument has its roots in what this exercise can teach us. Finally, and most poignantly, there exist in Christian art throughout the ages striking images of two monks speaking together being visited by a white dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit, descending from on high, or arising from out of their own mouths.

We are interested in that dove—for in it lies the secret intention of this exercise, an intention and result that were no doubt understood in the great spiritual traditions of the world, but only a faint echo of which has survived in its modern psychological usage. We may also surmise that its importance and even its very existence and form have been long forgotten or fatally altered in most of our religious institutions.

The exercise is simply described. Two people face each other who passionately hold diametrically opposed views about a given issue or idea, and they proceed to argue back and forth for their point of view. Let us call these people “Mary” and “John.” The rules are that when Mary

here do we find ourselves? We have spoken of “rehearsing” the work of morality—which is the work of love—in thinking together. We are discovering that thought—serious thought about serious things—may be an intrinsically social act. We may need each other in order to think intentionally about the most important questions of our life, the otherwise unanswerable questions that can be confronted only through awakening *the heart of the mind*, an awakening that results from the shared need for truth. There, in the work of thinking together, we wish to and we actually can, in a certain sense, love our neighbor, the one who shares our question. We can even love our enemy, perhaps especially our enemy, the one who opposes our view, who argues with us, who disagrees. With this enemy we can “rehearse” the need for differences between people, and, through this, understand the need for genuine complementarity in our mutual relations,

speaks, John may reply only after he has clearly repeated the essentials of what Mary has said. And it is entirely up to Mary to decide if John has given a fair and accurate statement of what she has just said. Only when this condition is fulfilled is John permitted to present his response and his point of view. And then, before Mary can answer John, she in turn is also obliged to summarize what he has said, to the point that he accepts her summary as fair and accurate. And this goes on, each answering the other under this rule that no one can express his or her own views until he or she has accurately summarized what the other person has just said.

My first full-fledged experiment with this exercise was full of surprises that showed me how little we really understood about the thought component of human conflict and about the possibility of resolving conflict through creating conditions within the mind. I am speaking about conditions that allow the unforced arising, however fragile, of the normal, intrinsic human feeling for one's neighbor—always remembering that this is still in the realm of “rehearsal.” Yet what a stunning “rehearsal for morality”!

LIFE WITHOUT ETHICS?

I don't remember in which class I first tried it. It could have been any one of them—the introductory course in philosophy and religion or the Plato seminar or the advanced undergraduate course on Emerson and Thoreau or perhaps the course called Modern Religious Thought. I remember only that I was trying to introduce the general subject of ethics and that I was operating under the assumption that everyone in the class more or less understood the meaning of the word and that everyone had his or her own personal experience to draw on in order to think about it. And so, when I asked for examples of ethical dilemmas or conflicts from the students' own lives (without their going into too much personal detail), I was bewildered by the fact that not only did no one offer

to speak, but that no one even seemed to understand what I was talking about. It even seemed that they had no concrete idea of what the word “ethics” meant!

How was this possible? Obviously, such situations had occurred in their lives, as they do in everyone's life—situations where one is painfully obliged to choose a course of action without being sure whether it is morally right or wrong; or where one knows what is right, but is strongly inclined to act otherwise; or where there is sharp disagreement between oneself and another person about the good and the bad in an urgent life situation. So why had these students become uncharacteristically tongue-tied? It was not as if I were asking them to divulge intimate secrets—I was asking only for generalities. What was their difficulty? Did they really not recognize the ethical dimension of their lives?

Suddenly, I began remembering certain things about my students. Over the years it had been like this: We would approach the subject of ethics, of good and evil, of right and wrong, and almost always they would speak of whether something made them “feel good” or made them “feel bad,” or “feel guilty.” Not whether or not they *were* guilty, but only whether or not they *felt* guilty. Not whether it *was* good or bad, but only whether it made them *feel* good or bad.

I had not paid much attention to this difference of language. Oh yes, I was always struck by the almost universal moral relativism of the young men and women that I tended to come in touch with. As in many other parts of our modern world, it is so much the fashion to deny the existence of absolutes in the ethical sphere that anyone who dares even to ask seriously about this possibility is immediately branded as naïve or fanatical. Who's to say what's good or bad, right or wrong? What's good in one place or for one person may be bad in another place or for another person: these are the “ethical” certainties of our modernistic era, and so many of our children—and almost all students like mine—simply accept without any second thought that all morality is relative to time, place, ethnicity, religion, social class, nationality, and so on. This moral

relativism is not ever in question, and many are the teachers and instructors who drill this point of view into them with a fervid dogmatism that easily rivals the dogmatism of any religious fundamentalist.

That much I understood about my students' opinions and beliefs concerning moral values. But what I hadn't seen until now was the possibility that, partly because of this fixed relativistic mind-set, they had never actually *experienced*, as such, the genuinely ethical element in human life! Or, rather, because they obviously did face choices and demands over and over again, as we all do, involving honesty and lying; the keeping and breaking of promises; stealing; injuring others; breaking and obeying rules, laws, and principles; self-sacrifice and self-gain; cheating; honoring or betraying trust—although they obviously faced situations involving these elements, such situations were in their consciousness immediately translated into matters simply of what “feels good” or what “feels bad.”

These were my troubled thoughts the day that I first tried the exercise in question. My mind was reeling. I badly wanted to go somewhere and think more calmly about what I seemed to be seeing about my students. I wanted to think more carefully, more contemplatively about it. It was as though a powerful new vein of reflection about all our lives had suddenly opened up: it was now no longer a question only of correct or flawed philosophical beliefs and opinions about ethics, but of the existence or absence of actual ethical experience. Was the *experience* of the ethical momentarily disappearing from our world, like some great endangered natural species?

I could not, however, go somewhere and reflect. I was obliged to continue with the class, and when I did—acting almost out of desperation because I was so unsettled by the apparent paucity of ethical experience in these young men and women—it led eventually to what was for me a revelation about the real causes of ethical conflict in human relationships. And about what, precisely, we must work at in our mutual human relations. It led me to understand, if only in the rehearsal theater of the mind, what is needed in order to call down into our threatened

common life a genuine contact, however preliminary, with the reconciling force of non-egoistic love.

TURTLES

“Take an ethical problem that none of us is able to solve, a problem that our whole society, our whole world, is unable to solve,” I said, as I started roaming around the classroom. “Take abortion—a completely intractable *ethical* problem. Logically speaking, each side has its uniquely compelling arguments and its uniquely good reasons—to the point that this very issue of abortion seems at the present moment to be the chief representative of the many-aspected *metaphysical* contradiction rooted in the fact of modern society, with its anomalous values, existing and seeking to perpetuate itself within the bosom of the great universal laws of nature and organic life that often oppose these anomalous values. In any case, no rational human being on either side of this question of abortion is entitled to just dismiss the other side. At the same time, nowhere, even among the most thoughtful individuals, is there more intense passion, more ferocity, more ‘certainty’ on each side.”

Heads nodded in agreement.

“Our society simply has no generally acceptable solution to the ethical dilemma of abortion,” I said as I returned to the front of the room.

I sat down at the metal table.

“So here is a test for us. This is *ethics*. We are in front of a painful and momentous question of right and wrong. How shall we try to think—to think, and not just wrangle—about it?”

The class remained quiet as I carefully explained the ground rules of the exercise and the standard of listening it demanded of everyone.

I then asked the class: “Who feels strongly that women should have the right to abortion?”

As I expected, almost all hands immediately went up. There were about fifty students in the class.

"Who volunteers to speak for this point of view?"

Slowly, one after the other, and to my surprise, all but three or four hands went down. I attributed this to "stage fright," but later I understood that something much deeper was involved.

"And who will speak for the opposite point of view—against abortion?"

Not a single hand went up. This was not too surprising, considering the makeup of the whole student body and the general political temper of San Francisco. But it was disappointing in terms of the experiment I wanted to try.

"Is there no one who thinks that abortion is wrong?"

I detected a slight twitching in three or four students.

"If you did feel this, would you be afraid to admit it?"

The twitching increased for a moment and then stopped.

"Well," I said, "that means we can't try the exercise."

At this, Janet Holcomb, seated to my right against the tall windows, said that, although she was pro-choice, she would be willing to argue for the other side for the sake of the experiment.

"No, it has to be a sincerely held opinion," I said. "Both sides have to believe in the rightness of their view with equal conviction. The forces on each side have to be equal and opposite—as they are in the world, and in our lives."

I waited, but no one came forth. I was sure there were one or two who held the view that abortion is morally wrong, but they had retreated into an intimidated silence. In fact, a gray pall had descended upon the class, a hollow silence. The men, in particular, seemed frozen.

"Why don't we take another topic?" sang out Elihu Andrews, a broad-shouldered, sweet-voiced black man.

"All right," I said. "What?"

After a few seconds, one proposal after another rose to the surface, looked around, and then immediately sank back out of sight into the gray silence.

"The war in Iraq," said Bernardo Di Giorgio.

"Gay marriage," said Agnes Huong.

"Globalization."

"Israel and Palestine."

But the hollow silence continued—an atmosphere of dull withdrawal. I was looking at fifty turtles peering out from deep inside their shells. Why? Why were these ordinarily vibrant and even volatile students now so passive?

Ah, but then one of the turtles stuck out her head and softly said:

"Partial-birth abortion!"

PASSION AND ATTENTION

It was like watching a black-and-white movie suddenly turn Technicolor. Immediately the air became electric. Hands flew up like startled birds. It was astonishing. Everyone began talking—to me, to each other, to themselves. Arguments were already starting—men and women alike. Here, obviously, on this issue, was where the white heat of the problem of abortion had moved. Was it not now, at least temporarily, at that point in time, one of the chief points of concentration of the moral crisis of our whole world?

At this point there was no problem finding volunteers for the exercise. The only problem was which students to choose from among the many who were offering themselves on each side of the issue. I had to decide fairly quickly. Should I take a man and a woman? Or should it be two women? Should it be seen as a "woman's issue"? Or was it more deeply true that it was first and foremost a *human* issue?

But why even look at it like that? Or, rather, to look at it like that meant to choose the participants solely on the basis of both the urgency of their concern for human life and welfare, and the intensity of their desire for the truth, wherever it might lead. What was needed was passionate conviction existing side by side with the willingness to step back from one's passions without intending or even wishing either to deny or

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to justify them. My God! Here, right away, in the theater of the mind, the fundamental ethical imperative was already rising—namely, the willingness in the midst of emotion, in the midst of fear or anger or craving, to try to free oneself from total and complete “identification” or “absorption” by one’s inevitable and automatically arising passions. Granted, it was only in the rehearsal theater of the mind—but wasn’t that the whole point of this exercise: to *study*, within specially supportive conditions, the possibility and the laws of the struggle to be good, a struggle that otherwise seems such an impossibility in the concrete, complicated conditions of everyday life?

But was I being presumptuous in assuming I was able to make such a determination about the motivations of my students? Was I foolish to imagine that I could see into them in this way?

In fact, and surprisingly enough, it was not at all difficult. There was simply no mistaking the presence of this mysterious quality in them: the simultaneous existence of passionate conviction and equally intense self-questioning: a conviction that was not “certainty”—that is, it was not fanaticism; and a self-questioning that was not “self-doubt”—that is, it was not timidity.

It is not possible for me accurately to characterize this quality in words. Hovering above or within the powerful contradiction between their personal conviction and their inner self-questioning there existed another, a *third*, quality. It showed itself, if I may put it this way, in the *atmosphere* that embraced them, that gave a certain softening glow to their skin, and which worked a manifold subtle contouring of their features, a contouring that made them as beautiful, present and normal as an Egyptian Fayum portrait. And it expressed itself physically, this quality, in the fact that they were suddenly moving with the integrity of lithe children—the body and mind in one piece. I *knew* whom to choose.

It was two women—Janice Eberhart and Arlene Harris, both sitting in the front row.

Janice was in her early twenties, slight and quick as a small bird, with abundant henna-red hair that she wore in a braid behind her. She had

the habit of sitting in her chair with her head bent forward, her chin touching her fingertips, which were pressed together as though in a posture of prayerful supplication—a posture she held tightly when she was trying to formulate a thought with special sincerity or logical precision.

Arlene Harris was a black woman whose age was difficult to determine—probably in her mid-thirties. Her skin was intensely, luminously dark, as were her large, steady eyes. A tall, raw-boned woman with close-cropped hair and high, wide cheekbones, she would occasionally come to class all smiles, wearing a blazingly beautiful Nigerian bobou that made her seem nothing less than an African tribal queen. She was a straight-A student.

Today she was dressed in her more customary crisp jeans and cardigan sweater.

I moved two chairs to either side of the metal table and motioned for the two women to come forward and take their places. “Remember,” I said to them, “you must be rigorous about this. The other person must repeat, not necessarily in the same words, the exact gist and meaning of what you have said. Only then is she entitled to respond. It will sometimes be tempting to settle for less, but don’t do it. It has to be a truly fair statement of what you have said, without anything essential left out.”

Then, as the two women were taking their places and turning their chairs to face each other, I said to the whole class,

“You have an important role in this exercise. You have to be quiet and very attentive; you have to listen very carefully. The people in front need to be supported by the attention in the whole room. The exercise will not succeed without that.”

THE SHOCK OF THE QUESTION

“The subject is partial-birth abortion,” I said, still facing the class. “And just so everyone clearly understands what is at issue, will someone please define it?”

A man at the back of the class said something not very clearly, and immediately four or five people were calling out their definitions. Up front, Janice, who was taking the “pro-life” position in the exercise, sternly offered a precise definition. Speaking with some emotional difficulty, and with her palms pressed together and the tips of her fingers touching her chin, she said,

“Partial birth abortion is a procedure . . . where the doctor delivers the baby . . . up to the point where only the head remains inside the womb . . . and he then punctures the skull . . . and removes the brain.”

No one moved. The clock on the wall suddenly seemed to be ticking very loudly.

After a long moment, I motioned to Janice to go on and begin the dialogue. Without a moment’s hesitation, she started, speaking—as has now become a habit among many younger women—with many of her assertions curling up at the end as though they were questions:

“I am against partial-birth abortion. To begin with, I think it has to be understood why the woman has decided so late that she doesn’t want to have the pregnancy? There are cases where continuing the pregnancy might be dangerous to her health—and that’s where I might say there’s a little bit of room. But if it’s not a matter of her own safety, her own life, then I would say that there are a lot of families who need children and can’t have them and who could adopt them—it’s not as if the child would be unwanted. Of course, to do that causes terrible emotional turmoil, but it’s going to be just as emotionally damaging . . . in a different way . . . to abort the child as to have the child and let it go. It’s still . . . I mean, some child could have been around and is gone now.”

She continued, pushing one thought out on top of the other:

“Sometimes the child is called a fetus, but we can’t really say whether or not it is a living child? And I think calling it a fetus just smears the issue? And makes it easier to accept. And, look, suppose when a child is born early, a premature child, and they would try to save the baby’s life . . . but suppose the mother decides she doesn’t want the baby, so there is a period where you just call it a fetus? And you can kill it.

“And I’ve seen videos where it is done and they take the camera up close so you can look at it and it’s . . . *alive!* It looks like . . . a *small child!*”

I interrupted her.

“Very good,” I said, in a professorial manner that I hoped could keep everyone’s attention mainly on the intellectual content of what was being said, and because I did not want to start the experiment with an overlarge demand on Arlene’s memory. “Obviously, there’s much more to be said; hold it for your next turn. Now listen to Arlene. And remember—she must give a fair summary of what you’ve said.”

Arlene began speaking in a flat, matter-of-fact way. “It seems that your main concern is that the woman opts to abort this baby so late in her pregnancy. She should have made the decision earlier. But there are so many families who want to adopt children and they could have the child and raise it with the proper care.” Arlene paused. “Is that right?” she asked with uncharacteristic hesitancy.

Janice quickly and warmly replied, “Yes, that’s right.”

“No,” I said to Janice. “There was more. She’s leaving out something. Say what Arlene left out.”

Janice obeyed, repeating what she had said—but this time with much less emotion—about the baby being alive and about the hypocrisy sometimes involved in calling it a “fetus.”

Arlene then repeated that part.

“Are you now satisfied?” I said to Janice. “Has Arlene given a fair and complete statement?” Janice nodded yes. “Then let’s proceed.”

I motioned to Arlene.

With her hands coolly crossed in front of her on the folded-down writing surface of the lecture-room chair, Arlene leaned forward. “It would never be something that I myself would do,” she said, “but I feel that it is a choice that every woman should have, even if it is . . .” She searched for a word “*not correct.*” She turned her steady dark eyes to me for a moment and then continued in a curious monotone: “I’m thinking of it from the point of view of the needs of the planet. There are so many people in the world, so little space and so little food—it is all out

of control. If this were a poor Third World country, another nation, it wouldn't be a question at all. They don't have the option of having such a procedure. But here in America, where we consume way beyond our share of the world's resources, we have the ability to have such a procedure. So in America even though abortion of this kind might not be morally correct, it's a choice a woman should have."

Speaking now smoothly and effortlessly, Janice replied:

"So you're saying that it's a choice that all women should have, that it's not something you would personally choose, but that all women should be able to decide for themselves and that it would be especially important now, especially in America, because we have such an overpopulation issue in the world and such an issue of resources not being equally distributed to everybody that the choice is, maybe, not *good*, but maybe makes sense in relation to the whole society we have today?"

Pause. "Is that a fair summary?" I asked Arlene. She nodded yes, but weakly.

"Are you sure?" She said nothing.

I began to detect something going on under the surface of this suspiciously calm exchange between the two women. In most other cases when I have tried this experiment, with issues involving politics, racism, religion—as well as with this general question of abortion—the students' struggle to step back from their passions was much more visible. Here this struggle had appeared only at the very beginning with Janice's definition of partial-birth abortion. After that, it had settled into an apparently lukewarm conversation and I began to wonder if I had paired the wrong people.

THE MORAL POWER OF LISTENING

But this was all about to change. It was about to change because of what always happens if this exercise is sincerely tried primarily as an exercise in the study of the moral power of listening. What may have seemed for

a few moments to be a lukewarm conversation was actually the manifestation of a totally new effort of attention, each participant working in an unfamiliar way to listen carefully to the other without reaction, without judgment, without anxiety about winning or losing. And this mutual struggle for impartial attention brought about one of the most beautiful, visible results of this exercise—it gave both participants the sustained experience of intentionally separating themselves from their opinions, rather than simply holding them back like chained dogs. Moreover, this effort of genuinely stepping back—inwardly—from their own emotionally driven opinions in order to attend to the other person was deeply sensed by everyone in the class, even though they might not have been able to explain what was so unusually gripping about an apparently modest, quiet little discussion.

"Arlene," I asked, "are you sure you're willing to accept that Janice has given a fair summary of what you said? What about the matter of Third World countries?"

"Yes, that's right," said Arlene matter-of-factly, "she did leave that out." Before Arlene could then repeat that part of what she had said, Janice jumped in.

"Okay," said Janice, "here it is: in Third World countries they really don't have the luxury or choice to have an abortion or not. But because in America we have so many things and so much money—which we take from the rest of the world—we are free to make these decisions."

"Is that fair enough now?" I asked Arlene. She said yes. "All right," I said to Janice, "now give your response. Take your time." She needed no time at all.

"Okay," she said, cheerfully, "in Third World countries, where abortion is not an option, mostly women do not have birth control and so have many children that they can't take care of—and it's true we don't want to recreate that situation in our society where we have so many resources available. So I do agree that we have the ability to make that choice where other countries don't have that option. But I'm wondering if just because we're so powerful it's okay for us to have that choice?"

Like—the more powerful we get, the more choices we're allowed to have?—no matter whether they're ultimately for the good of people or not? And I wonder if there are other solutions to the problem of late abortions that people are not considering just because the choice of abortion seems so readily available here? Like in other countries maybe they would be obliged to figure out a way to do something positive with a negative situation—whereas here we sort of look for the quick fix out of it—like a magic pill to make it go away? And that attitude may be a block that is difficult to correct—and so maybe this issue won't be resolved for a long time, because that attitude is everywhere in American society?"

And now Arlene: "She says that here in America we have so much power, and the more power we have the more choices are available to us and people have the ability to make these decisions. But because it's so easy to make these choices, people are being less than resourceful in finding other options that . . . that preserve . . . that are . . . better?" Arlene stopped. Something was happening.

"Are you all following this?" I asked the class, in order to allow some space in the process that was taking place between the two women.

Janice bowed her chin against her fingertips, nodded her head, and stated that this was a fair summary of what she had just said. At this, Arlene suddenly sat up very straight, tall and broad-shouldered in her chair. Her steady eyes glowed.

"Reply," I said to her, almost in a whisper.

"I agree with Janice," she said, "Americans as a whole are morally lazy and if abortion was not so readily available it would make people think more about it. And maybe that would be a good thing, a very good thing!" She waited a moment and then in a strong voice:

"But I still think the option should be available. It's just not *right*," she said, her voice rising, "to tell someone that they can't make a choice with their body. There's something going on inside of them and they should have *control* over that! Now, I'm not saying that you can never tell a person what not to do; there are complex issues involving the defini-

tion of fetus and about people being born or not being born and so forth—I'm not going into that right now. So, yes, certainly there are things you have to say no to. It's wrong to kill someone, obviously. But it is also wrong to tell a woman what to do with her body and this is what the dominant forces in our society have not yet understood. Me, the woman, the rights of my body, my rights . . ."

Here Arlene stopped. Again, the ticking of the clock became audible. I turned to the class: "Please notice," I said, "that a new point, a new issue has just been introduced into the exchange."

A MOVEMENT TOWARD CONSCIENCE

But it was more than just a new point, it was a new and deeper part of the psyche that was emerging out of Arlene's mind and instincts, and it instantly affected everyone. Right or wrong in any usual sense was not the issue. The issue was the human heart, one's own self emerging, one's own feeling, one's own thought. Arlene's words had new authority, the authority that comes from the beginning of the movement toward conscience. *Toward* conscience, no more, but also no less. The *beginning*, no more but also no less. She was struggling for her conscience. Years of creating conditions in which I was able to demand of young men and women that they try to think honestly had sensitized me, perhaps excessively, to this element in them, this moment when they cast aside both the "acceptable" and the superficially innovative and began to speak simply from themselves, right or wrong. When this happened, it was never violent, never strident, and it was always full of quiet electricity.

Arlene continued: "This body remains mine until the day I die and during that time it must not be legislated with undue purpose. This is not just about fetuses, this is about me and every woman who wants her freedoms. We have been struggling for centuries for the rights that men enjoy. In *Roe* the Supreme Court decided that it was the parent who deserved the highest level of constitutional protection. This is what I'm fo-

cusing on. Women need to be respected enough to have the same rights as men, the right to decide what's best for our lives, best for our bodies, to be seen as equals, to be treated as equals. Of course, partial-birth abortion is a nightmare, but do the men making the laws understand the nightmare of unwanted pregnancy as it sometimes unfolds in the course of a woman's pregnancy? Have they themselves ever menstruated? Ever feared their own pregnancy? Have they ever had a uterus or had a Pap smear or a cervical exam? Have they ever borne children or felt one grow inside of them? Do they know what it's like for a woman who finds herself terrified and alone in her decision to abort a pregnancy? Who has no options that protect her health and who feels forced to take matters into her own hands? How can they propose to legislate something they will never understand? How can they make rules about my body, who have never lived in a woman's body? . . . and never really include the opinions and influences of most women in their decisions?"

Janice, still in the posture of a supplicant, kept her head bowed, her palms pressed together, her chin just touching the tips of her fingers. Only one thing had changed: her eyes were now tightly closed as she listened with great concentration to every word Arlene spoke.

What was now happening was something that sooner or later takes place every time I have tried this exercise, and every time it is like a miracle. It takes place when the deeper feelings begin to emerge—not the agitated emotional outbursts we all know only too well, but the deeper passions of the emerging conscience. The "miracle"—though in fact it is actually lawful—is that the stronger and more deeply felt the passions of conscience are, the more an individual also quietly witnesses him or herself—that is, the more dynamically calm the individual becomes. And this act of stepping back within oneself then spreads or echoes itself in the other partner of the dialogue, and also, to some extent, in the students in the class. Just as in our mutual relations with one another the agitation of emotionalism tends to evoke agitation in response, so too can the steadiness of attention that is the inner companion of essential moral feeling evoke the same state in one's neighbor.

In the class all heads were now turned toward Janice. How would she respond to this powerful statement by Arlene?

With her eyes remaining closed, Janice summarized as follows:

"Women should have the choice to do what they want with their bodies, just the same as men. And in women the fetus inside them falls under that jurisdiction. And there has to be a definition of what is wrong that we all understand and agree on. And therefore we have to accept abortion—late-term abortions have to be allowed under the principle that all people have the right to do what they wish to with their own bodies."

"Is that a fair summary?" I asked Arlene. Of course, it was and it wasn't. The content was "accurate," but Arlene's passion was absent in Janice's account, inevitably and justly so—justly all the more because the same quality of feeling was arising in Janice as well, although it was about to express itself in another form. And I can say without any hesitation that the feeling each woman was experiencing about the issue of abortion was, without their naming it to themselves, accompanied and balanced, or rather, in a strange way enhanced by another equally deep essential passion, another equally deep harbinger of conscience: namely, *the wish for truth, wherever it leads*. The love of truth. One has to see it to believe it, to know what it really is like. The love of truth is not what we believe it is when we start the process of thought and dialogue. The ordinary intellect alone cannot really love truth. It can be "interested" in truth, but what it really loves and serves is usually something else, something not so beautiful in us. As Socrates shows through the genius of Plato's art, the love of truth can appear only when it has to be paid for inwardly, only when one comes upon the resistance of one's "own" entrenched opinions. *When one comes upon this resistance and still presses on, abandoning the attachment to one's own thoughts, an inner action is taking place which Socrates presents as a foretaste of "dying."* The true philosopher, he taught, studies death and dying through the act of sacrificing attachment to an "important" thought as it is occurring within one's own mind.

SOMETHING EXCEEDINGLY FINE

And now Janice, her eyelids fluttering and then opening wide, turned her head toward Arlene and began her response. It was obvious to everyone that "something," something exceedingly fine, was now passing between these two women.

"Arlene has very clearly brought out one of the main points in this whole question," she said, looking directly at Arlene, but keeping her hands still pressed together in front of her. "Is the fetus part of a woman's body, or is it a separate entity inside the woman? And . . . we do have rights, but also responsibilities over our bodies. But I think there's a different kind of responsibility we have toward children, our own children. And I wonder if we really understand the difference between the two kinds of responsibility—and even what the word 'responsibility' means? So that if I have a child—I mean, if you get to the third term and a woman decides for whatever reason that she doesn't want to continue, then the question is: has she been irresponsible with her own body or irresponsible with another . . . *body*, somebody else's. Like when does the responsibility of motherhood take hold? I think that's the question and I think people sort of blur it off when they say, well that's a fetus and what does that have to do with motherhood?—there's no maternal instinct, there's none of that.

"Of course to say that motherhood or maternal instinct doesn't exist—is obviously wrong. But the question is when does it start? When does there actually come to be this relationship between a mother and her child? And I've known people who have had miscarriages and they feel this *bond* was severed; so when did the bond start? And that is, I think, a matter of taking responsibility for *something else* and not just your own body . . ."

Janice stopped in mid-sentence. Slowly and uncharacteristically, she placed her hands on her knees and quietly looked at Arlene. Arlene, for

her part, also assumed an uncharacteristic posture, though the change was more subtle than Janice's. Her broad, proud shoulders gently relaxed and rounded themselves like folding wings. Her luminous black eyes held steady.

The students in the class, wondering who was going to speak next, were patiently turning their heads back and forth. For a moment, I was tempted to say something in order to break the silence. But just as I started, I realized how foolish that would have been. Whatever it was that was passing between the two women was becoming more and more palpable. It was something very fine and very strong—the word "sacred" would not be wholly inappropriate. And seeing that, sensing that, I suddenly remembered that it was this "something" that was the whole point of the exercise. I wondered to myself: how could I have forgotten that—even for a moment?

Finally, Arlene responded: "What I hear you saying . . . is that we're drawing a distinction between the woman's responsibility for her own body and the woman's responsibility for the body that she's growing inside of her. Saying that we have to look at where her responsibility for her own body ends and where it begins for her as a mother. Saying she has to decide when does it become *her child*."

Without waiting for me to say anything, Janice leaned forward and spoke directly to Arlene—in a strangely resonant soft whisper that was distinctly heard all the way in the back of the class. "That's right," she said.

LOVE AND LISTENING

There now took place what was in its way one of the most dramatic events I have ever witnessed in a classroom. Arlene just sat there, apparently thinking of how to respond. She just sat there without saying a word. No one was at all inclined to break the silence. A process was taking place within Arlene that was completely, unknown to any of

the students. Was she desperately struggling to find a counterargument? Maybe . . . and maybe not. Was she feeling “defeated”? “Bested”? There was no sign of that at all. Yet it was clear she was struggling.

What she finally said took us all by surprise.

She said only a few words:

“I can’t really argue with that,” she said, almost in a whisper.

Everyone caught their breath while the words seemed just to hang in the air. I could see Janice ready to rise out of her chair, perhaps to embrace Arlene. The class did not know what to do. It seemed that not even Arlene understood the change that had taken place in her and, through her, in the rest of us.

Perhaps because I had witnessed something like this before, in other kinds of conditions, I saw very clearly that for a moment Arlene had submitted herself to another quality of energy within herself. At the same time, I sensed the reflection of this inner action also taking place within myself. I sensed in myself a reflection of her inner freedom, a taste of the love of truth—truth not as words, but as a conscious energy that binds contraries together, that binds people together, truth as love. And it is because genuinely moral action in another person evokes in ourselves a taste of our own inner possibility;—it is because of that that we cannot help but feel genuine respect and love for a good man or woman. Her good action evokes a reflection of that action in ourselves. We ourselves become good when we sense another’s goodness. And in that moment we see that we wish for that; we cannot help but wish for that. We are built for that.

Of course, special conditions are necessary in order for this force to pass between and within people. In the usual inner and outer conditions of our everyday life, our egoism either cannot allow such perceptions to enter, or else we are fooled by artificial goodness in another, or else—in the end—we simply schizophrenically bifurcate ourselves, and our down-deep love of the good goes into hiding while in our surface personality we are “good” only when it serves our interests; and in our mind we become either sentimentally naive about ourselves and others

or nightmarishly cynical (or “realistic”) about the way of the world. Or, even worse—and of course very common—the upsurge of evil and brutality in man evokes in us the same mysterious forces of subjective fear and hatred that are the sources of human evil always and everywhere.

We are speaking now of a specific moral triumph in and through this one woman, Arlene, and in and through these two women thinking together and working to listen to each other. The class had broken into confused chatter—Had Arlene “lost” the “debate”? But if so, why did everyone feel a victory had taken place? . . . with no “loser”? Why did everyone feel so elated? Why was there such a celebratory mood in the classroom? With absolutely no sense of anyone or any opinion being “right” or “wrong”?

Yes, it was “only” in the rehearsal theater of the mind, but what a moment it was! And yes, it wouldn’t last for much longer than this moment and it might not influence the actions of anyone’s life, but what a glimpse of human possibility, what a glimpse of the awesome demand of what we all too easily speak of as ethics! Such a moment—call it, if you like, a moment of moral mysticism, or a moment of communal moral power—not only brings the meaning of ethics closer to us, it also, and equally, shows us how far from the good we actually are in our everyday life and in our everyday state of being, in our everyday mutual relations.

“We can go on with this in another way,” I said, finally.

“Tell us,” I said, speaking to both women, “what are your observations about this process of listening? What struck you about it—either about the work of listening, or about how you’re now *feeling* about your point of view on this issue? Is your position, your opinion, in any way changed? In what way?”

“It’s a very powerful exercise,” said Arlene, her voice still reflecting her vibrant state. “If you have to repeat precisely what the other person has said it means you have to listen very carefully.”

“And what does that do to you, what does that mean, what does that act require of you?”

“It demands that I focus,” said Arlene. “It means I have to really un-

derstand what the other person is saying. . . .” Arlene’s usually steady eyes were drifting toward Janice. It was clear that although she was addressing me, her heart was with Janice.

“And it really changes my perspective.”

“How so?”

“I really can’t hold on so tightly to what I believe if I’m constantly releasing it in order to listen to what she’s saying.”

At that I nearly lost my composure. “Fantastic!” I said. “We go through our whole lives getting into discussions and arguing about this or that—and never, not once, do we ever listen to each other like that!” I then turned to Janice, whose hands were now completely relaxed on her lap and whose look was riveted on Arlene.

“Although Arlene was the one who gave way,” I said to her, “I’m sure you must have been experiencing the same kind of thing that she was.” Janice looked at me and for a moment she started to bring her hands together, but then softly dropped them back onto her lap.

“Absolutely,” she said. “Obviously, we both got to say a lot more than you usually get to say in a discussion, but I found myself listening to a person, not to an argument. . . .”

Again I excitedly broke in:

“This is entirely the most important point in the whole exercise. Repeat what you just said!”

“I was listening to a person, not just to an argument.”

I turned to the class. “Do you hear that?” I said. “Do you understand what they discovered? You can go on disagreeing forever with another person. You can have a point of view that is 180 degrees different. You can be as passionate about your opinion as you want. But as long as you recognize and feel that you are listening to a *person*, there will be no violence, there will be no war.”

After a long silence, I said to the women: “Thank you. You were both wonderful.”

Arlene stood up to go back to the rows, but Janice didn’t move. “But wait,” she said, bringing her palms together once again and lowering her

chin to the tips of her fingers. “What happens when it comes down to actually making a decision? Actually having to choose what to do? What then? It’s all well and good to have a discussion about this, but *what about when you actually have to act?*”

The class suddenly became quiet as stone. Arlene stood by her chair in the front row by the window and did not sit down.

The professor—myself—is also quiet as stone. The question, the *one question*, has descended into the classroom and hovers in the air like a great winged life. Due in large measure to what has just gone on in the class, the one question of how actually to live enters now into everyone equally and evokes in everyone an “essence-feeling” that is somewhere between wonder and despair. Wonder as when one looks up at the immensity of a sky laced with an infinity of starry worlds; despair as when one honestly confronts the course of mankind’s criminal life on earth along with the seemingly intractable chaos and moral weakness of one’s own individual manifestations in life.