

KEN KESEY'S CLASSROOM CORRECTIVE, or, HOW TO FREE THE CUCKOOS

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When I first read *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, I was dazzled by the power and vitality of Randall McMurphy as he fought against the deadly, regimented ward life established by Nurse Ratched. As I prepared to teach Kesey's book, I became more highly conscious of his pointed use of the giant Indian, Chief Bromden, as narrator, as the perception through which their entire confrontation is filtered. Then as I saw the novel dramatized, I came to see the work as a secular morality play in which the humanistic virtues of McMurphy are pitted against the neo-Fascist vices of Big Nurse for the emasculated, minaturized "souls" of Chief Broom, Billy Bibbit, Harding, and the other "Chronics" and "Acutes."

But it was only when I was dittoing flawed segments from students' papers to set before their classmates for close scrutiny and correction (as good composition teachers are wont to do), that I realized with a shudder how very nearly I was approximating the role of Big Nurse. Kesey's finger which had for me so comfortably pointed at the villains out there, the "establishment," suddenly pointed at me and my fellow teachers.

What Billy Bibbits and Hardings we must be creating! Extending the analogy to the classroom made me consider how often we perform as Big Nurse-Teachers, proceeding in logical fashion, promoting what is "best" for the students, while so often serving only to undermine them. If we as teachers do, in fact, sometimes play the role of Nurse Ratched in the classroom, what better cure than to inject a touch of McMurphy into us so that we might heal rather than cripple, restore Chief Brooms to full size rather than diminish them.

The words and actions of R. P. McMurphy can be a point of reference for suggesting a somewhat comprehensive approach, as well as specific activities, which would help to enliven and humanize any English classroom. His basic ap-

proach to the "acutes" and "chronics" of Nurse Ratched's ward is, of course, to engage them in such a way as to bring each inmate dignity and self-respect. But the more particular techniques of McMurphy's approach—the laughter, the fabrications and deceptions, the gambling, the sexuality, and the horseplay—offer a more specific prescription for a healthy class.

Laughter is one of the basic curatives in McMurphy's survival kit. It is one of the first aspects of McMurphy's personality that Chief Broom notes in his initial description of the red-head. He notes too that it is not the canned laughter of the Public Relations Man, but one that is "free and loud and it comes out of his wide grinning mouth and spreads in rings bigger and bigger till it's lapping against the walls all over the ward." Broom goes on to say that its effects are universal, that "everybody on the ward . . . is stunned dumb by him and his laughing."

This human touch is much needed in our classrooms; the relaxed, comfortable atmosphere that real laughter suggests and engenders is a significant element for the nurturing of learning. But McMurphy's laughter expresses more than ease and good spirits. He very explicitly defines the deeper significance of laughter when he tells his fellow inmates that we must laugh, for all too often things are too bad to allow us to do anything else. Laughter, then, reflects the ability to look at the paradox of existence, to have a bifocal view of events. It is a form of curved or mosaic thinking rather than straight, logical, linear thinking. This complexity of perception is

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further expressed in the classroom by an atmosphere which provokes questions, engenders criticism, investigates discrepancies between *is* and *ought*. Such complexity of approach in the classroom can foster a comprehensive sense of humanity where tragedy and humor are able to coalesce naturally. More specifically, this understanding of laughter lends itself to the correction of imbalances in the teaching of composition and to the understanding of the language itself. In the English classroom students can be encouraged to explore the power of fresh, personalized writing, as well as to understand the communicative importance of conventional usage. They can be urged to stand in awe of the change and dynamics of language, while seeing with another eye the continuity offered by standards. Students in these kinds of classes will not seek the comfort and security of certitude, of one correct answer, but will come to confront the tensions of a more complex vision which would be much like that they are to face in the world "outside."

A second antidote which McMurphy employs to get at or around Big Nurse is his magnificent use of fabrication, deception or just downright lies. This "out of bounds" behavior constitutes a real threat to Nurse Ratched's "truth" telling sessions of the Therapeutic Community, and more generally, to her whole regime. McMurphy, of course, has gotten into her lair primarily by means of deception, and much that he does to undermine her power while preserving his and his comrades' well-being could be labelled as "deception" or "verbal self-preservation." One can almost establish a direct relationship between the restoration of the inmates' health and the size and frequency of their communal deceptions. (One should note too that the deceptions are an end in themselves and not merely a means to a greater end.) Most are verbal but the larger ones tend to become events of deception: the fishing escapade and, later, the late-night party with Candy and her friend, Sandra. Chief Broom learns this art well from McMurphy, for his final act upon breaking out of the hospital is to weave a grand fabrication in winning a ride to his old hunting grounds.

Examining this art's broader, more abstract societal definition, we can understand it as man's attempt to meet and overcome unnatural limitations or obstacles in a creative way. In the classroom such an understanding suggests immediate and obvious application. Clearly the English classroom needs to unleash its students from the notion that the "real" world is an inescapable oppressor. It needs to encourage them to flights

of wit and fantasy as real tools for survival, much as Thurber does in the celebration of fabrication in his seemingly overwhelmed characters. Such an urging suggests the classroom strategy of creative problem solving. Whether confronting problematic situations from their own lives or hypothetical ones of a more sophisticated nature, students are asked to weave scenarios which offer personalized solutions to the serious dilemmas which confront them. Brainstorming, too, fits well into this general classroom approach, for it urges groups to fabricate, to create spontaneous, unchecked responses to a common problem. Speculating about a non-existent world—"what if . . ."—engenders some of the same styles of learning which, like the McMurphy deceptions, stimulate mental play in a world that never was; it produces fabrication for the sheer pleasure it affords, for the fresh challenge that it offers one's mind. Notions as commonplace as student endings to fiction or dramatic works, writing parables and the like all serve to further the same ends which "lies" advance in Kesey's book. Many oral activities such as those suggested in Galvin and Book's *Speech Communication*¹ also lend themselves to this spontaneous outpouring of dodgery and shiftiness. Often just listening to the braggadocio lies of Twain's ringtail-roarers brings great satisfaction to typically untouchable students and frees their imaginations and encourages mental play. Certainly the manufacture of "stretchers" on the spot or in planned conspiracies like "the alibi game" would have much the same effect. In a broader sense, too, the whole understanding of literature—indeed, of art—can be informed by the concept of fabrication. Through exercises of this sort students can be brought to a fuller understanding of the artist's fabrication in creating his world of fiction and also to a greater ease in projecting into the imaginary world of art.

"My name is McMurphy, buddies, R. P. McMurphy, and I'm a gambling fool." Those words of introduction make it obvious that Kesey's hero defines himself in terms of gambling. He lays money on the line in cards, in lifting the huge instrument panel, and even in getting Big Nurse's goat. She tries to turn his followers against him because of his winnings at the gaming table, but they soon come to see the malice of her intent and realize that he has indeed risked and given his life for them. He gradually gets them to enter into the spirit of risking and makes them see, as in the case of his own failure

¹Kathleen M. Galvin and Cassandra A. Book, *Speech Communication*. Skokie, Illinois, National Textbook Company, 1972.

to lift the instrument panel, that it is the attempt, the trying, that is all important, not the winning. Thus Chief Broom is the real measure of McMurphy's success, for he put his strength to the test in ripping up the panel McMurphy himself could not budge.

The risk-taking in such gambling is too threatening for many students. They have had enough of failure and are no longer willing to lay open even the slightest part of themselves. (Most "remedial" programs which have reported success have as a common factor the removal of this possibility of failure: a gauge of how desperately such risk-taking confidence is needed.) Establishing trust and nurturing self-confidence are, of course, necessary groundwork for risk taking. Just as McMurphy did not ask Bromden to lift the panel when he saw himself as diminutive, so should the encouragement of risk-taking be graduated and cumulative. But that significant step must eventually follow. Students must finally allow themselves, like Chief Broom, to venture "out of the fog, out in the open where we'd be easy to get at." More is needed than traditional testing and classroom competition to encourage a serious testing of the self, a willingness to extend beyond previously established personal achievement. A student-centered approach or, within a more conventional classroom structure, emphasis on independent study projects is a logical classroom style to encourage this exploration and to allow students to let their personal inquiries converge back to the class. Cooperative class ventures such as film making can also serve to let individuals put something of themselves out in the open. Even within the context of a rather conventional classroom, Kesey's prescription calls on us to approach content in such a way that students are routinely forced to make strong, independent judgments, whether in reference to a poem (its meaning, its excellence, its appropriateness) or a television commercial (its implications, its calculated appeal, its morality). But in either individual or group activity, real risks should be experienced any time the students take themselves and their work seriously, knowing that fellow students will be asked to attend that work with equal seriousness.

In any classroom the importance of risk-taking will, I think, point us toward more writing, both spontaneous and self-conscious, which gives students the opportunity to discover their thoughts and the uniqueness of their own expression, and, most important, the opportunity to *commit* themselves. Defining one's thoughts and placing them in a hard medium—one that does not allow for

the vague "you know" or "I really meant to say" to reconcile an unpersuaded listener—is a somewhat risky business. And the risking is extended further if we can tone down all of the expository "escapes" which we frequently incorporate in our own writing and too frequently pass on to our students: the "perhaps"; the "might possibly"; the "on the other hand"; the effaced, I-less self; the unreal subjunctive mood, which fosters balanced and uncommitted indefiniteness. In writing, too, students should be challenged in journals of free writing sessions to gamble with a variety of unfamiliar forms, styles, modes, genres.

The benefits of risk-taking also involve the nurturing of creativity. James Gallagher² and other leaders in this field have argued that the most effective way to promote creativity in our students is to foster anomie or asocial behavior in a controlled environment. To effect this, students are thrown into contrived situations where they are pushed toward making non-peer-sanctioned decisions. The first attempts of students who have become passive and personally uninvolved in learning, like Kesey's characters, may be slow and halting, but the rewards in terms of personal insight, positive self-esteem, and primed creativity are worth the risks.

Sexual problems are at the heart of a number of Kesey's inmates' psychiatric troubles. Bibbit, Harding, Ruckly, and even Chief Broom suffer from an acute sense of sexual inadequacy or guilt. Miss Ratched shrewdly manipulates them through her understanding of their weaknesses, while McMurphy, in contrast, continually works to develop a sense of sexual prowess in them, from his first appearance when he substitutes the pornographic cards for the pinochle deck, until his final triumph in urging Billy to release his virginity to the Dionysian world of Candy Starr.

Kesey's perception of the physical and psychological benefits of lusty sexual activity for these men cannot find direct application in the classroom, but his broader insight into sexuality can: the importance of moving beyond societal repression through a release of the inner self. At its extreme, such release in the classroom would imply Rogerian encounter techniques or some of the exaggerated methodology of the humanistic movement. George Brown's "Confluent Education"³ and much of the work of Harold Lyon,⁴

²James J. Gallagher, *Teaching the Gifted Child*. Boston, Allyn and Bacon, 1969, pp. 201-208.

³George I. Brown, *Human Teaching for Human Learning*. New York, McGraw Hill, 1970.

⁴Harold C. Lyon, *Learning To Feel—Feeling To Learn*. Columbus, Ohio, Charles E. Merrill, 1971.

however, attempt to offer a more acceptable balance between concern for the affective and cognitive domains. Much of what they have set forth in their technique-laden books has been lifted and modified for effective use in a variety of English classrooms. But the values clarification movement probably offers the best hope for gaining the inner release that Kesey champions. It is a beautiful common on which a student's emotional core can safely venture forth in a holistic manner: "thinky-feely," if you will. The "alligator river" values exercise, for example, asks students to evaluate the decisions involved when a desperate lover values crossing the river to share her life with her beloved more than her chastity, which she relinquishes to a boatman in exchange for safe passage. This exercise piques students to bring deep feelings, which rise out of basic value systems, to the issue at hand.

The study of literature can be shaped so that it, too, reaches into the inner lives of students by withholding a more objective, analytical approach and making the initial point of entry the personal reaction, the feelings generated by encountering the work of art. Again, such intensity makes the rigor of the unraveling all the more powerful and acute. Moreover, literature and value exercises can often work off each other in very provocative ways.

Writing allows unique explorations of the inner world, if we as teachers can penetrate what Roszak has so accurately defined as the "Myth of Objective Consciousness."⁵ If we can shut out the simplistic notion that "creative" writing belongs only to special days for haiku writing or to the rare assignment to write a short story, then we are well on our way to letting writing express, rather than obliterate, the person with pen in hand. James Miller has said that communication is not then a matter of precision and exactness but a matter of resonance and reverberation.⁶ Understanding that, we can be released from some of the awful responsibility of correctness and can open doors that will provide space for the self. In *Word, Self, Reality* Miller offers ample theory and numerous exercises for achieving this end, but a basic understanding of the problem and a teacher's bright imagination are all that's needed for such release.

Horseplay (fun-and-games) seems an innocu-

ous enough assault on the well-regulated world of Big Nurse. In fact the monopoly, free-lance basketball, imaginary world series, and general rowdiness all might be seen as just so much juvenile highjinks. They are, though, her most insidious enemy, for they all eat at the very foundations of her world of order. Just as Chief Bromden literally flew the coop after killing McMurphy, each of the episodes McMurphy sponsors is a way for the inmates to transcend themselves; they are enabled to move up into a world of play.

Horseplay can be abstracted then as moving above one's self, a basic and ultimate prescription offered by Roszak, Norman O. Brown, and most others who think in a Keseyian manner.⁷ Peter Berger, who is in no clear way a Keseyian thinker, offers strong philosophical/theological support (in a *Rumor of Angels*) that game playing, drama, and most other forms of play in which one enters a world which lies in or outside the "real" world are a means of momentarily transcending, a way of making us know that there is a good bit more that we can become.⁸ Such can be the hope of the English classroom.

Encouraging, rather than denying, complete involvement in fictive worlds is a natural beginning point for us. Reading for the sheer pleasure of it ought to be legitimized. Escape literature—if it allows students to escape with themselves, rather than from themselves—need no longer be denigrated. I think that simulation games derive their pleasure from this act of moving above one's self and should be used because of the transcendence which they involve. Drama, whether staged and reproduced or spontaneous and creative, offers this same opportunity with a heightened degree of intensity. Dramatizing the role of Piggy from *Lord of the Flies* or the part of Iago from *Othello* will allow students to experience a new dimension of themselves. When they immerse themselves in the "game," our students will, like the catatonic Ruckly, have hands once nailed to the wall freed to guide them in achieving goal after goal.

Analogies are dangerous, especially in the learning game, but we could do worse than to turn in our white starched uniforms as a way of letting students break out of the cuckoo's nest. And seeing one's self, preserving one's self, exposing one's self, exploring one's self, and transcending one's self is the way that R. P. McMurphy did it.

⁵Theodore Roszak, *The Making of the Counter Culture*. Garden City, New York, Doubleday and Company, 1968, pp. 205-238.

⁶James E. Miller, *Word, Self, Reality*. New York, Dodd, Mead and Company, 1972.

⁷Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death*. New York, Vintage Books, 1959, pp. 307-322.

⁸Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*. Garden City, New York, Doubleday and Company, 1969, pp. 57-60.