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Making Pictures

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(What follows is adapted from a talk that Ted Estess, former Dean of the University of Houston Honors College, delivered at the college's Convocation on August 29, 2013.)

During the last week of my last semester in my last year in college, I took a course in aesthetics. David Miller was the teacher, and he required all of the students to make a presentation. I decided to work up a presentation on Picasso. I didn't know much about Picasso, but of course that did not deter me. A word of advice to students: never let the fact that you do not altogether know what you are talking about keep you from talking. After all, not knowing what they are talking about does not stop your parents from talking, does it? And how do you think professors could possibly lecture for an entire semester without occasionally talking about things that they don't know much about? Certainly they do not know all there is to know about all the things that they talk about.

In a university, you keep on talking precisely because your knowledge is partial, incomplete, provisional. That is perhaps the best way for you to learn *what* you don't know, and learning some of what you don't know is fifty percent of the reason to go to college in the first place. Learning *that* you don't know is the other fifty percent. Socrates called that "learned ignorance."

By learning some of what we don't know, we gain confidence and competence and the capacity to do things in the world, including the ability to perform well in our various jobs. By learning some of what we don't know, we equip ourselves to be good accountants, good engineers, good chemists, or good teachers.

But, as I said, we need also to learn *that* we don't know.

Suppose you go home this week-end and your father asks you, "What did you learn this week?" And you reply, "Dad, I learned something really important, something that's going to make a tremendous difference in my life." Your father asks, "What's that?"

And you say, "I learned some ignorance." You father may well call the dean and ask for his money back.

But then you might be able to explain to your father that, by learning *that* we don't know, we acquire modesty, humility, and greater respect for, and willingness to listen to, what others have to say. Persons who lack a goodly portion of learned ignorance make terrible friends and insufferable husbands. My good wife Sybil often reminds me precisely of that.

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But back to my story: For weeks I studied an etching that Picasso made in the 1930s. The etching was of a child and the Minotaur, that mythological creature with the body of a man and the head of a bull. He lived deep in the labyrinth below King Minos's Palace on the island of Crete. In Picasso's etching, the Minotaur's head looks something like the huge head of a buffalo, all hairy and wild, with rather short horns. The only other figure in the etching, the child, looks to be twelve or thirteen years old.

After weeks of looking at the Minotaur and the child, I came to class in early May to make my presentation. I had a slide up on a screen so that everybody could see the picture. "Here," I said to the class, "we see the girl and the Minotaur deep down in the labyrinth." Everybody looked at the child and the Minotaur up on the screen.

"Notice," I said, "that the young girl is on a ladder and the Minotaur stands below. Also notice that the girl is holding a light, something like a candle, perhaps a lamp. She is going up the ladder with her light; she is in flight from the threatening beast that lurks in the shadows of the pit."

I went on to associate the Minotaur with sexual energy, which got everybody's attention. I associated the young girl with innocence and vulnerability. I talked about prepubescent fright and prepubescent flight. I said that the girl was in flight from things that always lurk in the shadows deep down below, things like darkness and chaos and sexuality and terror and death—and other things that are never altogether under our control.

Finally, I shut up. Professor Miller asked his first question. "Mr. Estess," he said, "why do you think the child is going up the ladder? Couldn't you as easily say that the child is going down the ladder?"

I was struck dumb, mute. To hide my panic, I turned again to look at the picture on the screen.

My teacher was right. Any fool could see it. The girl could as easily be going down the ladder as up the ladder. She might not be in fright and flight at all; she could be fascinated by, even attracted to, the bull.

Why hadn't I seen that? I had been looking at that etching for weeks. I had read everything there was to read about that etching. Not one of the experts said anything about the girl going down the ladder. They didn't say anything about the girl going up the ladder either; they just talked about her standing on the ladder.

Who would think that a young girl would go toward a great beast?

Who would think that a girl would have the courage—or be so reckless as—to go toward those uncontrollable things that lurk in the shadows of the pit?

Who would think that a young girl would go toward chaos, darkness, sexuality, terror, possibly death?

But I knew that my teacher was right: Picasso's girl could be taking light into the labyrinth in order to tame the man-bull, to humanize him, and thereby give human measure precisely to those things that lurk in the labyrinthine shadows. She could be going down in order to bring the beast up. She might even be

the agent of his transformation, which, of course, is precisely what happens in *Beauty and the Beast*.

Professor Miller asked a second question. "Mr. Estess," he said, "what makes you think the child is a girl? It is not at all clear," he said, "whether the child is male or female. Picasso, you know, could be dealing with androgyny.

Androgyny? I didn't know what androgyny was. To hide my panic, I turned again to look at the picture on the screen. Professor Miller was right. It was not clear whether the child was male or female.

I don't remember anything else that happened in class that day. But I did have sense enough to see that, if I had learned anything, it had little to do with Pablo Picasso. Picasso's etching had been the occasion, not the content, of what I had learned.

On the way out of the seminar room, my teacher stopped to talk to me. He said, "Ted, you might remember that aphorism from Wittgenstein." I wasn't sure what an aphorism was, but I did know that Wittgenstein was a terribly complex philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century. I had read a few of his pages, but I understood not a word of what the man was saying.

"What's that, Professor Miller?" I asked.

He replied, "Wittgenstein said, 'A picture holds us captive—and will not let us go.'"

I walked alone out of the room and across the campus. As I walked, I kept repeating those words again and again like a mantra, repeating them while breathing in and breathing out. "A picture holds us captive—and will not let us go. A picture holds us captive—and will not let us go. A picture . . . will not let us go."

That spring, a picture of Picasso's picture had held me captive. Consequently, I could not see Picasso's picture. I saw only my picture. I saw a girl going up the ladder. As a result, I couldn't see that Picasso perhaps intended a boy going down the ladder or a sexually undifferentiated child standing on the ladder or any number of other possibilities. My picture blinded me. In service to my picture, I had reduced—diminished—that which I was seeking to know and to understand. It was only with my teacher's prodding that I was able to break free.

Now what are we to make of this situation? And what does it have to do with education?

On the one hand, being captive to a picture seems bad, or at least not all good.

On the other, being captive to a picture can be good, or at least not all bad, if for no other reason than that it is inevitable.

Inevitably, each of us is captive to a picture or to a group of pictures—or, if you prefer, to a story or to a group of stories—with which, and in terms of which, we understand ourselves and other people. Our pictures can serve us ill or serve us well—or sometimes both.

One day a student named Anna came to see me. She said, "Dr. Estess, my parents say they are going to disown me."

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I said, “Anna, what are talking about?”

She said, “My parents say that they going to cut off all financial support from me. They say they will refuse to see me—and will forbid my brothers and sisters to see me.”

Anna went on to explain that her parents wanted her to be an engineer or a doctor but that she was determined to study psychology and become a psychotherapist. Anna told me that she didn’t know what to do. I certainly didn’t know how to advise her.

Now, Anna’s parents had one picture for how the life of their daughter ought to unfold. In service to that picture, they reduced Anna to one set of possibilities. Their picture made simple that which was complex, namely, their daughter.

Conversely, in service to her own picture, Anna sought to realize what she took to be her own particular destiny.

I didn’t fault Anna’s parents. It was perfectly understandable that they had aspirations for their daughter’s life. If they hadn’t, they probably wouldn’t have been very good parents. And it was fine for them to aspire for their daughter to be an engineer or a doctor. So there was nothing wrong with the content of their picture. The problem was in the way they held on to their picture. They could not think or talk about it. Thus they were rendered closed and brittle and altogether resistant to other possibilities for Anna.

We can, then, hold to our pictures in a closed, intolerant way, or we can hold them in an open, flexible, imaginative way. How we hold our pictures goes a long way in determining whether our pictures serve us well or ill and whether they serve, for instance, friendship and civil discourse well or ill.

Anna majored in psychology. Her parents disowned her. They refused to see her for five years, but by then she was working as a psychotherapist. One day she told me that she loved—really loved—trying to help people like her parents. I should add that Anna’s parents turned out to be very proud of her and she of them.

I come, then, to say that we can understand education—or at least a portion of education—as a process in which each of us undertakes the difficult task of becoming aware of—and then thinking about—the content of our own particular pictures. Perhaps more importantly, education—or at least a portion of education—is a process in which each of us considers how we hold onto—and how we are held by—our particular pictures.

If students are like me when I entered college, they are, at least to some extent, thoughtless captives to some pictures of how things are. Becoming educated people does not require that we give up all our pictures. Our teachers would be wrong to ask that of their students; they, after all, have their pictures, too.

But teachers do urge students to gain some critical awareness of, and thereby some distance from, the pictures by which they see and interpret themselves and the world. In the process, students may question and change some pictures. In doing so, they may disappoint their parents, shock their friends, and surprise themselves.

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And when they come to graduate, they may well find that, owing to their education, three things will have happened:

First, their intelligence will not only be better informed than it was when they matriculated but will have become more supple. I like the notion of a “supple” intelligence: responsive and adaptable, not rigid or obstinate, not flimsy but firm.

And when students come to graduate, they may find their imagination to be more capacious than when they entered college. I like “capacious,” too: a large and roomy imagination, an ample space in which to play with lots of possibilities for oneself and others.

And upon graduating, students might find their spirits to be more generous than when they started out. I like “generous”: a spirit that is tolerant, magnanimous, kind, compassionate toward others—and toward oneself.

A supple intelligence, a capacious imagination, a generous spirit: we nurture such fine things in ourselves by thinking about, even by changing, some of the great variety of pictures that define us and make us who we are.

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