

A CONTRIBUTION TO JANE ARNOLD'S PANEL
TESOL 1999 NEW YORK CITY
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Sorry not to be with you in person today! What's keeping me home is just some stubborn foot trouble. If that clears up, I'll hope to see many of you at next year's meeting. Meantime, though, here are some thoughts that I *would* like to get onto the record.

A PUZZLING DICHOTOMY

I was delighted to see Jane's book,¹ and *I'm* finding it very helpful. If *my* experience is any predictor, I'd guess that the potential market for such books consists of two kinds of people. One group (large, I hope!) will buy Jane's book and eagerly read every word in it. The other group won't even read beyond the first word of the title, because that word happens to be "affect," and words like "affect" and "humanistic" just turn some people off. This near-dichotomy, between Accepters and Rejecters of this kind of thing, is in fact my *subject* this morning — the Dichotomy and various ways of dealing with it. First, though, a preliminary detail within that topic.

ANOTHER TWO-WAY DISTINCTION, BUT NOT A
DICHOTOMY

Over the last year or two, communications from several very impressive younger colleagues have led me to decide to use the next 4 of my 15 minutes this morning to clarify one distinction found within the first group: that is, among those who use or who are at least actively interested in "humanistic" or "affect-oriented" approaches. The distinction I'm talking about is the one between the people whom in my 1990 book I called "secular humanists," and people from various religious traditions whom I called "religious humanists." For today, however, I'll just call them "Column A people" and "Column B people."

1. Column A people tend to get excited about human potentials that have hitherto been undiscovered or underdeveloped.

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As a Column B person, I too tend to get excited about human potentials that have hitherto been undiscovered or underdeveloped.

But I also think there are built-in limitations on people's ability, no matter how sincere and how concerned they may be, to rise by their own individual or collective efforts above ignorance and self-centeredness.

2. Column A people tend to believe that these exciting potentials have come into being over the eons with the gradual evolution of blind matter and energy, and over the centuries through cultural conditioning.

I believe that these potentials are parts of an order, created by a self-conscious, intelligent God (though I don't pretend to know anything about the methods or the duration of the creative acts).

3. Column A people tend to think that the meaning of human activities (if there *is* any) is found only within this world, with human beings as the center.

As a Column B person, I think the meaning of human activities is to be found in preparation for a life *beyond* this world, centered on God.

4. Column A people tend to think that the goal of human activities should be to increase knowledge, wisdom and social harmony, and contribute to the physical and emotional health of others.

Although as a Column B person I think the goal is *beyond* this life, I also think that preparation *for* any life to come is consistent with, and may even require, efforts to increase knowledge, wisdom and social harmony, and so forth.

So Column A people and Column B people can, should, and commonly do cooperate with each other in exploring human potentials, in finding ways to develop those potentials more fully, and in trying to increase knowledge, wisdom and social harmony, and so forth. The area of difference, I think, lies in the deeper, subtler, more fundamental outcomes they are likely to produce, such as I discussed in Chapter 11 of *What's at Stake* (1998).

5. One final point: Column A people, as far as I can tell, tend to see their own motivations for doing such things in terms of high principles and good will, and I certainly would not dispute that.

Various kinds of Column B people will have *various* kinds of motivation. As a Column B person of the Christian variety, for example, I see my own motivation for doing such things more in a historical light. In a nutshell, it's (a) God having become a particular human being at a particular time and place; (b) me being thereby set free from what would otherwise have led to certain and permanent disaster; and (c) me for the rest of this life trying to become more and more like what God wants me to be..... That kind of thing.²

FIVE WAYS OF DEALING WITH THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN THOSE WHO ACCEPT AND THOSE WHO REJECT THESE KINDS OF APPROACHES

Yokum's Exegesis

Now back to the Dichotomy, and to the Accepters and the Rejecters of our kinds of approaches. Li'l Abner Yokum, in the old comic strip, was a big, strong 18-year-old who ordinarily had no trouble in defending himself. Occasionally, however, some collection of ruffians would get the better of him. Then we knew it was time for his mother Pansy to step in. Pansy Yokum was 5' tall and 98 pounds, but with flying fists she always made quick work of whoever had been beating up on her boy. As the defeated enemies lay unconscious at her feet, she would calmly brush the dust off her hands and explain to Li'l Abner, "You see, Son, good is stronger than evil because it's *nicer!*"

This line about good being stronger than evil because it was "nicer" always brought me an uneasy chuckle. I ducked because I knew something was wrong. I was uneasy because like most people I hoped and assumed that good would eventually triumph, but I too was not really clear about how and why. Today, it occurs to me that Pansy was like you or me deciding that affect-oriented teaching is just better than more conventional approaches merely because it fits in with our own ideals, or with our own personal Myers-Briggs profile. I know *I've* certainly done enough

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of that! Yokum's Exegesis can be stated as "The way I feel things ought to be is consistent with how they actually are."

Now let me summarize four additional what we can laughingly call "Principles," each of which attempts to correct the one before it. I've given them fanciful names, but they are in fact quite serious.

Friday's Cold Water

There's an obvious way around Yokum's Exegesis. All we have to do is to resolutely put *aside* our personal interests and commitments, our ideals and our preferences, and let ourselves be guided by *the-way-things-are*. As Sergeant Friday of *Dagnet* used to say to overly-talkative witnesses, "Just the facts, Ma'am!" In a word, "Things are the way they are regardless of how *we* think or feel *about* them."

Bohm's Warning

But ... David Bohm, the author of *On Dialogue*, and definitely a Column A person, said that to the extent that the mind is working with problems in which all of the data have come from outside itself (for example, from the inanimate physical world), there's a good chance for objectivity and clear results. But, he warns, to the extent that the data that the mind is working with consist of its own products, the mind — at least the individual mind — is not reliable. We can test theories to see how they fit the cold, hard facts, but the facts we examine and the tests we select, as well as our criteria for "fitting" or "non-fitting" are influenced by our previous convictions and commitments. Briefly, Bohm's Warning is that "Your mind can play tricks on you, especially when it's working with its own products." But Friday's correction to Yokum's Exegesis works only if we know something about "the way things are, " and since our opinions about what is true are subject to Bohm's Warning, we're almost back to where we started, so let's try one more way around it.

Eisenhower's Aphorism

Dwight Eisenhower is reported to have said that "Everybody should have some strong faith, no matter in what." In that spirit, teachers who have mutually

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contradictory reactions toward a new approach or toward affectively-oriented teacher training programs, or whatever, can simply say, “Well, what’s true for you is not the same as what’s true for me. Our convictions about what is or is not ‘true’ are products of our genetic makeup plus our experiences, and are ‘true’ or ‘not true’ only in relation to those factors. So let’s not defend or insist upon our individual convictions, and let’s not try to change each other’s views. Let us rather listen carefully and respectfully *to* each other’s views, in the hope that from this dialogue will arise a new body of shared truths.” (This was in fact the main point of Bohm’s book.) Briefly, “What you believe makes no difference, but believe something, and let’s talk about it.” This brings us to...

Stevick’s Reluctant Conclusion

As a matter of fact, Eisenhower’s Aphorism should work fairly well on matters of low or medium urgency. But for most or all of us, there are certain matters that are of such high urgency that we feel we simply cannot afford to let the wrong side win. In regard to matters at this level, it commonly happens that people in each column (Columns A, B, C, D, or however many “columns” there are) would like to see people from the other column limited in their power and in their range of functioning. The urge to protect ourselves and society from the wrong kind of influences may express itself through limitations on access to the communications media, or through destroying credibility by means of slander and innuendo, and so on.

As I said earlier, a *language* course (like any other sustained and organized activity) can have effects that are deeper than just the learning or teaching of a language. Here is where the teacher and his/her *ideas* are important. Consider this:

- IF ideas don’t affect what happens in life (though I think they do), then there’s no reason to worry about truth.
- AND IF there is no truth, OR IF truth is purely relative, then there’s no reason to try to maintain and propagate one position, or to reject another position and try to keep it from affecting our own lives and the lives of others.

- BUT IF there *is* truth that's not just relative, then there's good reason to search it out, and to put it into practice.
- AND IF I think I've *found* some of that truth, I (or you, or anyone) may — and indeed should — try to make it widely available to others.
- AND IF, MOREOVER, I think my knowledge of the truth is certain, then I could possibly conclude that there's no reason to be civil in my expression of it, or to be moderate in my efforts to limit the influence of error. I think it was Reinhold Niebuhr who spoke of “the natural cruelty of the self-righteous.”
- BUT EVEN IF it's possible for humans to find pieces of non-relative truth, I recognize my own fallibility in identifying truth, and in preserving it, and in stating it. I do believe there is non-relative truth, but I'm wary of any person including myself who is absolutely sure that his or her understanding of absolute truth is the absolutely correct one. *Recognition of my own fallibility* should incline me (or you, or anyone) to be civil about presenting a bit of truth, and in pressuring others to adopt it. This is *appropriate diffidence*. But at the same time, *if I (or you, or anyone) believes that there is truth, and that the search for truth is worthwhile, and that we have found a bit of it*, then we need not and *should* not remain silent. This is a basis for *honest confidence*.

On my first trip overseas, I was an enthusiastic part of a movement to eradicate the bad, benighted, old method (Grammar-Translation), and replace it with the shiny new one (Audiolingualism), and I had no patience with representatives of the old. Nowadays of course, it's Audiolingualism that's denounced by a new generation of zealots as bad, benighted, and old. And so on.

As you continue in language teaching, you will doubtless hear, ringing out every few years in one or another part of your field the cry “Before us nothing was!” At those times, I urge you to remember that confidence without diffidence will bring either chaos or autocracy, whether in language teaching or anywhere else, but that diffidence without confidence will bring stagnation, or worse, it will produce subservience to whoever lacks appropriate diffidence. Honest confidence and appropriate diffidence! Balance them!

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... Balance them!

This is the thought I'd like to leave you with today. Thank you!

¹ Jane Arnold 1999. *Affect in Language Learning*. Cambridge University Press.

² For more on my view of Christianity in the context of language teaching, you can look at pp. 86-95 of my *Humanism in Language Teaching Oxford University Press*, 1990. This book is out of print, but at the time of this writing, through the courtesy of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, electromagnetic copies can be downloaded free of charge from www.sil.org. The same is true for my *Success with Foreign Languages* (Prentice-Hall 1989).

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