

Understanding the Role of the Transformational Teacher

By John R. Stevenson

It was in the spring semester of 1968, when I first became aware of the teaching of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze with the help and guidance of my teacher and mentor Dr. Brunhilde E. Dorsch, who was Professor of Eurhythmics at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania for more than 40 years. She is a dearly remembered as a feisty and fiery individual who was direct, and “in your face honest.” There was no holding back with Brunhilde, like it or not she let you know exactly where you stood. In every eurhythmics lesson, every improvisation lesson, and every pedagogy discussion she managed to challenge me in two ways: First to accept my talent, my abilities, and myself for who I was meant to be, and second to take solace in the fact that I would always be a student, and in that I do take great comfort.

Like all of us, Brunhilde had flaws and imperfections too. It is interesting with beginning Dalcroze students just like novices piano or voice students, we tend to see our first teacher as the ideal, sitting high up on a pedestal. We cannot quite see the flaws the pedestal is too high. For most of us, our first teacher was the best. No one could ever replace him or her. I must tell you that to this day I feel that same way about Brunhilde. I had the great fortune to be educated by some of the very best American teachers such as Ina Howland, Marta Sanchez, Lisa Parker, Bob Abramson, in addition to an array of brilliant European educators who were in fact direct students of M. Jaques. Nevertheless, I remain attached to Brunhilde unlike no other. There was no one who could teach like her. She was dynamic and so full of energy even at 8:00 in the morning. I loved the way she improvised always with mixed meter and complex rhythm patterns, and very interesting harmonic colorations very much like Bartok who was one of her favorite composers and Kabalevsky. The interesting thing is that at this moment I could not describe one lesson that she ever taught me. I have only impressions, sensations, ideas and, of course emotions. I have heard many times that we tend to forget what our first teacher taught but remember the emotions we felt while under their tutelage.

In order to gain further insight into my own teaching I have been actively thinking about what Brunhilde did to capture my attention, incite my eagerness to learn, and inspire my imagination so that I would eventually want to teach. Was it the person she personified, was it the Dalcroze methodology she so aptly taught, or was it something she recognized in me and decided to respond?

To help me with my query I turned to my practice as a yogi that is, the training I experienced to become a certified yoga teacher. As I have moved through the various stages of development, I have come upon many profound and truly gifted yogis who have

taught me well. One of those yogis is the psychologist, author, and Scholar in Residence at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, Dr. Steven Cope. He gave the keynote address at the Kripalu Yoga Teachers conference in October 2003, where he spoke eloquently about transformational teaching, a term the Kripalu Center is actively attempting to define and quantify.

Dr. Cope spoke about the work of a well know Austrian born physician, Dr. Heinz Kohut, (1911-1981) professor at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis from 1950 until his death, and founder of the "Psychology of the Self." Through the development of "self-psychology" he challenged the heroic American myth of rugged independence, self-sufficiency, and the idea of struggling alone against all odds. No matter how noble, human beings could not become who they were meant to be without living in a sea of deep and intimate relationships. Our "Self's," our very beings, are inescapably imbedded in a relational environment without which we cannot develop. Human beings are "called forth, evoked and seen into being" from out of a rich surround of relationships.

However, in order to be seen into being, evoked and called forth, there must be among the sea of relationships those that support, sustain, and carry us as we transition or "transform" from the person we are into the person we will eventually be. Our parents who carry us through all the various stages of transformation that life offers are the most likely candidates to provide these relationships. From early days in the womb, through the birth experience, and on through puberty, the parent is guardian, guide, provider, mentor, and sage. In fact, in a certain respect, the parent serves as a "transformational object," something that young and old human beings hold onto and rely upon throughout their entire transformation and beyond.

Transformational objects can also be actual objects such as a child's blanket or a pacifier or a stuffed animal or doll. Often, children cling to one or more of these objects no matter where they travel. They hold fast to the known so that moving into the unknown is not so scary. Even as adults, we possess and hold onto our transformational objects. Photographs, keepsakes, old diaries and even certain books can allow us to hold onto the security of the past as we focus on the present and transition onto the future.

I can remember our third child Marc who carried his baby blanket with him everywhere he went. The blanket, after hundreds of washings, now reduced to a mere 12 by 6 inch rectangle was essentially a rag, and one that he could not relinquish for anyone or any reason. Eventually, his mother and I convinced him that if he were to bury the keepsake in our back yard, it would always be there unharmed, and that he would not have to worry about it. For some unknown reason he saw logic in the argument and agreed. He was finally able to relinquish his "blankie" and yet find contentment.

One other example of Marc's need for transformational objects concerned his great unwillingness to go to first grade. He had been in kindergarten and thoroughly enjoyed the experience, but first grade was not in the cards as he saw it. As it happened, just as school was about to begin, Marc was hard at work building one of his many "projects" with cardboard and duct tape, and simply did not have time for school. The project, which happened to be a life-size robot, was far more important than school. As parents, we did our best to explain that the project would wait until after school and that nothing

would happen to it while he was away. He did not agree. Therefore, we took him to school anyway. After all, we were bigger. Upon his arrival at school, the teacher noticed that Marc was very unhappy and quite angry. She inquired about his feelings and he let her know exactly what had happened and informed her that school was out of the question until the his robot was complete. Without one moment of hesitation, the young sage suggested that Marc return home, retrieve his unfinished robot and bring it to school. She assured him that he could work on it in school whenever he wished. From that moment, Marc fell in love with both the teacher and the entire concept of school. She inspired him so much that he now builds even larger projects as an engineer with the United State Army Core of Engineers. I hope he is not still using duct tape. She understood that the robot could act as an object of support as he transitioned from home to school and with that, she connected to him in a profound way. She let him know on a purely subconscious level that she understood his inner conflicts and would help him find ways to resolve them. Furthermore, she offered compassion by first really listening to his story and further by allowing Marc the freedom to decide when he would work on the project. She provided space for Marc to be who he wanted to be. First, she understood Marc's true nature, and then allowed him to follow its course.

From that very profound experience, I learned that if individuals are going to engage in the art of teaching they must first connect with their students in the same profound manner as Marc's young teacher did with him, and as Brunhilde did with me. As students, we must take refuge in our teachers. We need the interpersonal transformational relationship that Kohut talked about in order for us to develop into either the scholar, politician, business tycoon, entrepreneur, doctor, dentist, lawyer, scientist or artist we are meant to be. According to Dr. Kohut, we all need transformational relationships as much as we need oxygen. Individuals denied of this oxygen may wander aimlessly through life ever seeking attention, gratification, safety, security, and contentment. For them, true joy and contentment become illusive and perhaps unobtainable.

Teachers who are willing to open themselves to their students and the possibilities of this type of relationship are free of any fear of intimacy, they continually work to cultivate patience, they understand the power of compassion, and most importantly, they provide unconditional love for each and every student. In addition, they fulfill four essential roles within the relationship. Dr Cope clearly defined these rolls in his address to the Kripalu Yoga Teachers.

As transformational teachers we provides four essential rolls for our students. First, we serve as the student's **mirror**, reflecting the truth about who he is—good and bad. Second, we serve as an **object of projective identification** where the student recognizes in us what he has only dared to recognize in himself. Third, we provide an **alter ego** for the student, where he sees us as his "other self," his very best friend, and learns how we have provided for change in him. Finally, we serve as the student's **benign adversary** by provided him with a worthy opponent, someone benevolent with whom he can safely compete.

MIRRORING

When I study my relationship with Brunhilde, I recognize that she fulfilled most if not all of these roles for me. However, the most significant role she portrayed was that of mirror. She provided the mirror I needed to ignite my passion for teaching. As students, we must see all aspects of our personality completely. We must have a teacher who will acknowledge us for who we truly are, and accurately reflect not only our potentials and gifts, but our imbedded dysfunctions as well.

I often encounter students who lack acknowledgement as musicians and artists. This is especially true among the young men. Even though seen, accepting their gift for its deeper and more profound value may not be the case. Parents will suggest not overtly, but in the subtlest ways, that music is something better done on the side while science or math present the true path to happiness; translation, money. (See Talent: [A Gift from God](http://www.bethms.com/pedart_Talent_aGiftFromGod.htm) by J. R. Stevenson at www.bethms.com/pedart_Talent_aGiftFromGod.htm .)

The truth of the matter is that many supportive parents unwittingly distort the reflection of who their child is or who he could become, and actively reflect who they want the child to be. Inevitably, the child experiences inner conflict between what their instinct and feelings tell them and the messages they receive from those around them. Eventually, they believe no one understands them, they feel invisible, unwanted, and alone. Conversely, children recognized for who they truly are and see their reflection in the light of truth and blossom like a plant drenched in sunlight. They come alive; they are “seen” into existence.

Brunhilde remained my mirror for several decades. She acknowledged my gift and my shortcomings and allowed me to see them accurately. This was pivotal in my life because for Brunhilde and me there was a particular chemistry, a positive energy. As Dr. Cope explained it: “Energy of relationship has access to potential and gifts.” Brunhilde recognized something in me, mirrored it, and I began to respond. In truth, I turned toward the light and dropped into a transformational relationship with her. When the chemistry happened between us it was as if a third entity entered the room, a third force of our collective consciousness of being. Dr. Cope calls it simply “the third.” This third had access to a river of energy within me that I could not have accessed on my own. “The third”—the state of flow between two beings allowed me to do things I could have never done without it. Brunhilde was a master at accessing this energy in part because of her own electrifying personality. She always said: “energy begets energy,” and when her energy latched on to mine, we were off and running.

PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION

Projective identification is somewhat the opposite of mirroring. Here, student and teacher meet and for some unknown reason begin gravitating toward each other. The student feels almost compelled to be in the teacher’s space and to learn from him, and likewise the teacher almost feels obligated to teach him. This observable behavior takes place without conscious awareness. The talent or gift that lives within the student instinctively recognizes the mastery of the teacher and begins to react so that a connection between them may be established. In other words, the small seed of talent and ability that lies within the student recognizes the full flowering plant, alive and in its fullest

expression within the teacher. Our instinctive nature seeks out someone who will appreciate what we have, understand its value, and know how to develop and nurture it. The gift in us recognizes the gift in another and as Krishna once said: “Only the divine can recognize the divine.”

The dormant talents lying within me much like a small acorn, leaped as it identified the mighty oak living full-grown within Brunhilde. However, in retrospect I realize there was yet another teacher who portrayed this role for me with great depth. Her name is Mme. Edith Naef from the *Institut Jaques-Dalcroze*, Geneva, Switzerland. When I met M. Naef, she was about 75 years young, and was beginning her final year of teaching at the *Institut* before submitting to her state-mandated retirement. She was then, and remains a most dynamic individual, strong willed, in complete control, an excellent musician, and an absolute genius. I was twenty-two years old and immediately recognized her extraordinary gift, the unsurpassed skills of a Dalcrozian, and knew immediately that she already was what I traveled across the Atlantic Ocean in hope of becoming.

It only took about two weeks before I was at her side daily. In addition to the regular arduous class work, she and I were meeting for several additional clandestine private lessons weekly. She insisted on discretion since she did this for no one else. I continued my work with M. Naef until my final graduation two years later. She officially retired but continued to teach non-professional classes and did not stop teaching until she reached the age of 95. Fortunately, for me, I happened to be in Geneva for her last class and shared that moment with her. It was an honor. Even as the *Swiss Romande* Television cameras were rolling to record this momentous occasion, she took the time to correct and advise me. She was not teaching her last class, she was simply doing what came naturally—never mind the cameras. She saw her work as a solemn duty, and relinquishing this duty was not an option, even to the end. Our relationship remained deep and intense for years afterward because she never let go of her commitment. Her energy, like Brunhilde was boundless. “The Third” was always present when we worked together. It worked miracles for me. I could feel myself infused with her knowledge and skill, but above all, her love for the work of her beloved master, M. Jaques.

ALTER EGO

Our alter ego is usually someone with whom we strongly identify sometimes referred to as our “second half” or even as our “inseparable best friend.” Teachers often serve as a student’s alter ego. This is especially true when the student and teacher have connected on that deeper level where “the third” presents itself. It is a very natural part of the process for the student to begin taking on some of the characteristics of his mentor. Students continually work at “trying on” the teacher and becoming not just like the teacher, but becoming the teacher himself. To this day, and especially when I am teaching eurhythmics, I feel the presence of both Mrs. Dorsch and Mme. Naef. I hear myself speak in the same tone of voice, using the same words and even the same physical gestures and movement. As a student, I drank them in and incorporated who they were into my own personality. I see, hear, and feel them in me. It is both comfortable and comforting. Combined, they served and continue to serve as my alter ego, my other half, my

inseparable best friends.

It is easy to have both voices in my head because these two musicians were incredibly alike in most ways. They shared the same commitment to the method and the same dedication to the student, and the very same temperament. Fortunately, they had very different strengths. Brunhilde was the pedagogue, an absolute artist in the classroom with any level or with any age of student. She could develop a lesson on any given subject with great depth and understanding that would have a profound effect musically, physically, and psychologically. She carried a deep sense of commitment to the welfare of the student in all respects. Often, her “tough love” approach was difficult to handle, but nonetheless it was born out of her love for the work and her love for the student, two most essential elements of an educator.

Edith, on the other hand was the Dalcrozian technician, a genius in the art of eurhythmics, improvisation and solfege. She commanded an enormous respect among colleagues, students alike and received both love, and even fear from everyone she knew. She was the best in her field, she knew it and expected only the best from her students and her colleagues. In truth, she was not easy to work with at times and therefore, not always the best teacher for everyone. One needed a strong constitution and a rather thick skin to weather the moments when the brain and body did not want to cooperate. Her reputation was widespread and well deserved because she understood the Methodology from the inside out. She was one of Jaques-Dalcroze’s original students and it was most evident.

Keep in mind that musicians tend to study with individuals in whom they recognize something of themselves. That little seed inside the student must react, inciting him to gravitate toward the teacher. Likewise, teachers tend to teach individuals in whom they recognize something of themselves, albeit their younger selves. Another of my great teachers was Miss Ina Howland. I only enjoyed the presence of her spirit for a very short time but nonetheless it was powerful enough to change my life forever. I remember meeting her for the first time and instantly recognizing her genius, her power, and her extraordinary musicianship. She and I instantly created a relationship that lasted until her death.

I met her at the age of twenty-two while working toward my Dalcroze Certificate. After a day or two into the program, I taught a practice lesson that received rather appalling reviews from my colleagues and teachers. Throughout the half-hour-long critique, she sat and said nothing while everyone else joined in with what I felt at the time was great vigor. I was very unhappy mainly because I thought that Ina had abandoned me just after we had truly connected as student and teacher. After everyone had left, she remained behind still sitting with that profound Native-American profile and still silent. It was ominous. Finally, she turned, looked at me with those powerful dark eyes, and said, “Why didn’t you tell them to go to hell?” After a long ensuing discussion, I decided that my future was in Switzerland, training with the remaining original Jaques-Dalcroze students. I finally committed myself to the Method.

In the discussion, Ina taught me a powerful lesson. She helped me see that I needed to find the teacher in me by intentionally trying on the personalities of my teachers, but

not just any teacher. I needed to find the teachers with whom I could connect in a profound way, in a way that would affect my thinking, my musicianship, and my movement. I learned that we are alike inside, made of the same “stuff,” and I needed to find the teachers who were willing to share their “stuff” with me and with whom I could share mine. She told me to “try on” different people, see how they fit and to move on when they do not. “Above all” she said, “Stop struggling, let go, allow yourself to flow into the current, allow it to happen. Take on those teachers who affect you the most, practice who they are.”

BENIGN ADVERSARY

This role is the most difficult and sophisticated of the four functions. Here the teacher does his best to become the student's worthy opponent. Since the pursuit of excellence requires strong feelings and even aggression sometimes, the teacher must gently push all the right buttons in order to incite the student to engage in a healthy intellectual and musical encounter. Here the student begins to formulate his own positions, a defense of those positions and thereby gain more skill and knowledge and eventually a stream of independent thinking

Having such a teacher who is willing to play this role is most fortunate since it is a very difficult role for even the most seasoned of us. It not only requires the teacher's skill and knowledge but more importantly, his patience, compassion, and a deep love for his student. Students develop a more comprehensive understanding of their knowledge through appropriate challenges to their thinking and even through measured defeat by a loving, caring, and worthy opponent. This functions well because the student loves the teacher as much as he loves the work and the teacher's love for the student remains unconditional.

How do we become a transformational teacher? There is no course or textbook. There is only a pathless path. Transformational teachers do not usually set out to be teachers. For them teaching is a natural outgrowth of the mastery of their skills and the development of their talent. For them teaching is as natural as the sun traveling from east to west. Transformational teachers develop from the inside out; form the love of their art and the deep desire to develop it.

In his closing remarks, Dr. Cope asked everyone to figure out what their gift is and what the universe needs. Master it and realize that in the mastery lies the ability to teach. We alone are responsible for creating the atmosphere for our gift to flower. The mastery itself becomes the teacher. The gift is not of our own making and does not belong to us. Through our life, we are to be good stewards and strive to create around us a sea of relationships that call us forth. We create our relationships and they create us.

Since I have been taught by the very best, I have learned to teach. I allowed my instincts to seek out those teachers who I intuitively recognized as having the resources to respond to me on a deep interpersonal level. They taught me how to teach myself and from that knowledge, I began to teach others. Brunhilde Dorsch, Edith Naef, and Ina Howland will always remain alive and vibrant within me. They remain my mirror, my identity, my altar ego, and my benign adversaries. They remain my source of inspiration, energy, and love for my work. I hear their voices as I speak, I see their spirits as I move, and I feel their touch when I play. I live in hope that I have been able to pass some of what they gave me to others. Each of us has our own transformational teachers, and most of them are hiding in plain sight.