

ON AUTHORITY AND AUTHORITATIVENESS

Sid White

During the past year and a half I have been subject to many of the stresses that prevail at this college. For me, a major source of anxiety has been that of defining and re-defining my role and identity as a teacher at Evergreen. I was first able to articulate the problem at the end of last year when I wrote my self evaluation. This was my concluding statement:

...The Evergreen situation is ambiguous to say the least. This poses a heavy obligation on each individual to define himself and his role; it isn't there established, ready-made for him in rules, ritual and custom.- My learning this last year involved a re-discovery of myself as a person and a teacher. I have a better sense of what I do well and what I need to learn to do better. I look forward to next year and a continuation of this process.

It is now the middle of "next year", and the process of definition and re-definition has continued. It has been a slow and painful process--I'm a slow learner when it comes to learning about myself--but it has led to increasingly deeper insights into myself and the Evergreen environment which has provided such a challenging context for personal discovery. As I see it now, my problem over the past year and a half has been that of a person whose temperament and teaching stance are essentially active (if not aggressive) and who, as a consequence, has often been at odds with an Evergreen reflex that tells him to hold back, assume a more passive stance, and cool it.

I have searched my soul. I have tried to be less "hot" and more "cool." I have partied and group processed with my students. I have even gritted my teeth and forced myself to go underground and assume a low profile (I tried this last Winter and it nearly wiped me out!).

Are these devices nothing more than Evergreen Home Remedies? I'm not sure, but they were of benefit since they did help lower my defenses and those of my students, with the positive result that we were able to compare perceptions. All well and good, but the central issue was and is me and my stance as a teacher in the context of the Evergreen scene. Add the two together and you get an image--in my case the image of a pushing, demanding, hard-nosed, authoritarian teacher. One of my students stated the case very clearly and honestly in his end-of-quarter evaluation:

I believe you can be more effective next quarter by receding somewhat as an authoritarian image. There seems to be somewhat of a difference of images between the way the group perceives what you are doing and the way you perceive it. Your intensity for doing things sometimes puts people off, since at times people have varied levels of intensity about reaching a certain objective. Some members of the group feel you are overpowering them, and while it is necessary for the group to keep moving toward planned goals, this is not always the best approach for group relations....

This states the case rather tactfully. Actually, I detect at least two rather typical responses when I incur my students' wrath:

1. "Sid is laying his trip on us"
2. "He's an authoritarian son of a bitch!"

There was a time when these responses bothered the hell out of me. They made me feel frustrated, alienated and insecure. They put me on the defensive and I found myself brooding at five a.m. about Sid White's failure to establish Good Group Process. I no longer do this. I believe I now understand the problem and I am ready to share my insights with anybody who is interested. Thus, in this year's Fall quarter self evaluation I wrote:

Not all of my students see me [as an authoritarian], but some do and possibly all do at some time or other. Having this image does not threaten me simply because I don't see myself that way. I am concerned however, if and when having this image interferes with my effectiveness as a teacher and any student's effectiveness as a learner. I believe there is a lot of confusion among students (and faculty as well) at Evergreen over this business of authority, and I intend to write an essay on "Authority and Authoritativeness" that will clarify the problem out of existence and establish me as an authoritative authority on authoritarianism!

So where am I? I take great pleasure in what one of my students said about me in her end of year evaluation last June:

I have found him to be an exciting, enthusiastic, devoted, patient teacher: Broad interests and talent, with the ability to be more demanding of students than they sometimes are of themselves and to hang tight, incurring their wrath, until they see the light. Why does this please me? First of all because it came from a person for whom I have a lot of respect--one of the most serious, intellectually honest, and perceptive students I have ever known. Second, because I read it as an acknowledgement of who I am and what I do well. It speaks to my authoritativeness (about which I will have more to say later).

Now I come to an important insight: I have found that my authoritarian image is an initial image, and one that is subject to change. Moreover, it is an image that is most often formed by students who are insecure, and are therefore easily put down or made defensive by any manifestation of authority. Understanding this has really enabled me to cool it, since I now know that the answer to the problem does not lie in masking my authority. It lies, rather, in unmasking the authority that lies within the student! I'll say more about this later, but I must first define my terms:

1. Authority as Role. Judge, officer, administrator, teacher. 'By virtue of the authority invested in me, I have the responsibility/power to...' Whether we like it or not, all of us who teach at Evergreen have this authority role. To be sure we have other roles, but this is one of them. We are expected to make decisions on the receiving or not receiving of credit. We are responsible for evaluating the substance and quality of work done. The same authority as role applies to Deans, Vice Presidents--yes, even to our soft-spoken president. We can't pretend this is not the case. Evergreen is not Summerhill! Thus, the authority-teacher or authority-administrator image haunts us and unleashes all kinds of psychological hangups in ourselves and others. Old Jung was right--patriarchal archetypes lurk all over the place ready to trip us up no matter how trust-inducing we try to be.

2. Authoritativeness. Authority by deed. To be an authority on something, especially the authority of one's own experience. To be confident about what one knows and doesn't know and what one can do about it. In this sense, to be a confident, experienced, authoritative artist, scientist, carpenter, scholar, statesman, prostitute. I think of learning as the art of having

experience which is tested and re-tested (checked out) to the point that we can be confident in it as our experience. Some of us had this kind of authority before we even started school. Education is supposed to be an extension and refinement of this process. It usually is not. Why? Because most of our teachers were authoritarians and not authoritative artists or scientists. If they had any art or science, it was that of the put down (more about that later).

3. Authoritarian. A personality type. From my observation, usually a person who lacks confidence in the authority of his own experience and, consequently, that of others. Hence his reliance on authority as role which he imposes on himself and others. I also have observed that authoritarians tend to be subservient to authority figures and roles they regard as higher than their own.

Finally, I have observed a surprising diversity of ways in which authoritarianism is manifest at Evergreen. I see expressions of authoritarianism that range all the way from reliance on military-type hierarchies to equally subservient submission to the presumed authority of group experience. Even Fritz Perl's "We won't lay our trips on each other" philosophy has become a creed adhered to and imposed in true authoritarian fashion! I regard this last form of authoritarianism as perhaps the most threatening to the Coordinated Studies experiment; it breeds a dogmatic, do-your-own-thingism that undermines efforts to establish viable learning communities at Evergreen.

Now, having defined my terms, I would like to restate the problem as I see it at Evergreen:

As I have already said, many people at Evergreen (not only students, but faculty, staff and administration as well) are terribly confused about this authority business. I've had contact with a number of students who are as ambivalent as hell about it--so much so that they'll damn you if you do or you don't assert your authority. No doubt deans have experienced the same thing with faculty and so on up the old authority line to you know who (sorry about that, Charles).

I attribute the cause to culture and what Paul Goodman calls "miseducation." Both have been a big put down to our students (and us as well). They have been taught from kindergarten on, to look to others--to peers, experts or authority figures, for all the important questions and answers. The curriculum is almost invariably about someone else's authority: The mysterious authority of the great man, the genius. The plodding but sure fire authority of the so-called scientific method. Nonconformists (individuals who question this external authority) in the classroom suffer the same fate they do in the culture: they are treated as egotists of the worst sort, people who lack humility, objectivity and all those virtues which in practice are put down which make people either submissive or rebellious to any and all forms of authority.

I don't think the so-called Counter Culture has changed matters as much as many would believe. True, the authority of the "Establishment" or the "System" has been challenged, and I personally feel that has often been to the good. But this authority has been replaced with an under the 30's Group Think that is often smug and shallow. At its worst, it cuts young people off from older people who do, after all, sometimes, have some things of value to offer.

Here, I think, we come to the crux of the matter--the ability to discriminate between the various forms of authority I have been discussing. The most distressing failure of our educational system is that it has not provided young people with the mental and emotional skills and attitudes necessary to establish, acknowledge and develop their own authoritativeness. Lacking the

authority of their own experience, they are easily threatened by its presence in others. Thus, the response is either submission, rebellion or escape into such delusions as "After all, everybody is entitled to their opinion, one opinion is as good as the next, and who's to say that..."

This kind of situation is nothing short of tragic since it denies the possibility of any significant learning process: A person who is not aware of the authority--or at least the potential authority--of his own experience cannot acknowledge or respond to the authority of another person's experience. There can be no learning or teaching or exchanging of anything but platitudes, cliches, grunts and groans!

I now come to where I stand as a teacher at Evergreen. Again, I quote from this fall's self evaluation:

I intend to teach in the sense that I carefully present what I know and what I think and how I respond to images and ideas. I want to present my sensibilities [my authoritativeness as an artist-teacher]. I do not intend to push this on my students as The word. I want them to listen and look and check things out so that they know what to accept and what to reject [to have their own authoritativeness]. I want them to know what they don't know so they can do something about it!

What this means is that I intend to:

1. Acknowledge and invite my students to acknowledge the authority invested in me by the administration and the Board of Trustees. Acknowledge that this authority is by no means absolute and unconditional. My decisions can be questioned and challenged and should be if they are bad decisions. I have been invited to be a member of this faculty because there is evidence that I can exercise this authority effectively and responsibly. If there is evidence to the contrary then I will not and should not be retained.

I have a responsibility to actively promote the quality of education at Evergreen. My actions as planner, teacher and evaluator will increase or lessen the credibility of the Evergreen enterprise. Thus, I give a damn if people are ripping this place off, spinning their wheels or doing crappy work, and I have an obligation to let them know this is no uncertain terms.

2. Demonstrate my own authoritativeness. Present myself as a person who knows what he is doing most of the time and who knows (or is soon able to know) when he doesn't know, and does something about it. In this sense, a model learner: Someone who is responsive to, and thereby responsible for, his learning process.

3. -Acknowledge and demonstrate my ability to respect and respond to the authoritativeness of others, including my students (it goes without saying that this authoritativeness must be demonstrated).

4. Encourage and give support to my students in their efforts to do the same.