Allan Bloom: September 14, 1930-October 7, 1992

Allan Bloom was an extraordinary scholar. His translations of Plato and Rousseau are not only the most accurate available; they are so graceful that they make one think those authors wrote in English. His essays on Plato, Rousseau, Shakespeare, and Swift are outstanding for their insight and their humanity. And his writings on the crisis of liberal education in our time remain indispensable for anyone who faces that crisis. But Allan Bloom was, above all, a teacher. His soul was possessed by the noble and generous impulse to help the young to satisfy their natural longing for self-knowledge and self-fulfillment. The task of education was for him the greatest of pleasures and the passion to educate students and potential students animated all of his activities, including his writing.

There can be no doubt that Allan Bloom was a great teacher. Young people of vastly different backgrounds, temperaments, and tastes found in him the kind of teacher everyone always longs for but few ever find. Generations of students—from Yale and Cornell in the 60s, Toronto in the 70s, and Chicago in the 80s and 90s—were enchanted and enraged by him and were proud to call him their friend. He inspired many of us to abandon our best laid plans and to devote our lives to studying and to teaching. He transformed the lives of all of us. And consequently it is difficult to find a student of his whose face does not light up and whose soul does not come alive when remembering those days of studying with Mr. Bloom.

How did he do it? This I do not know and I am not sure that even he understood it very well. For just as some human beings are natural athletes or musicians, Bloom was a natural teacher. He taught more by instinct and divination than by reflection and choice. Teaching was simply his way of being.

The most immediately striking thing about Allan Bloom was his amazing vitality. He would walk into class dressed in one of his dazzling Italian suits, carrying his elegant leather briefcase, smoking with gusto, and invariably chatting or joking with a student. At the front of the class, he would take out the text of the day and perhaps a single sheet of paper with one or two questions written on it. After glancing at the sheet and lighting another cigarette, he would pause, look up at us, and smile. And then he would begin, to speak and to smoke, to laugh and to frown, to pace and to gesticulate, to shock and to charm, somehow all at the same time. Anyone who thought that this Professor of the Great Books would be a bookish fellow himself was sadly disappointed—or pleasantly surprised. Everything about the man expressed his intense and full passion for life. One could not help but wonder, while sitting there in class, what could possibly be the source of this man's overflowing spirit and enthusiasm?

Near the beginning of every course I ever took from him, Bloom would express his conviction that the study of the great philosophers and poets of the past was the single most needful and most pleasant thing we could do. Now this claim, which seems so implausible when read on the written page or when heard from certain mouths, seemed altogether plausible and even compelling when heard from Allan Bloom. For he did not say such things dryly or donnishly but passionately, like a real human being. He spoke about Plato and Xenophon and Hobbes and Shakespeare in a natural and personal way, as one speaks of old friends one knows intimately and who are most dear. He spoke about studying Socrates and Nietzsche as one who has seen and done everything and who has learned from his own experience of life the necessity and the rewards of living with those thinkers.

Allan Bloom always said that the only serious reason to study the philosophers of old was to learn about oneself. Again, this claim seems utterly fantastic. What is Socrates to me? What am I to Socrates? Yet in his classes we came to see the truth of this claim. To study with him was not to lose oneself in the Great Books but to find oneself in them. It was to use those books to understand our own experiences and to use our experiences to understand those books.

Socrates, Rousseau, and Machiavelli were not The Great Thinkers of the Tradition but rather teachers themselves who somehow sprang to life in his classes to challenge, to infuriate, and to persuade us. Those classes were great dramas in which Glaucon and Adeimantus, Emile and Sophie, Moses and Borgia were flesh-and-blood characters and in which we were not spectators but characters ourselves. Sometimes we were outraged and bewildered by the books. Sometimes we were moved. Often we were moved to laughter by the jokes of the philosophers, by the jokes of Bloom, or simply by his own infectious laughter. But never were we left cold or indifferent. For no matter what we thought before taking his class, we left it feeling that we had come into contact with a new world, that we had learned of human possibilities we had never dreamt existed, and that our lives were somehow fuller and more interesting as a result.

Allan Bloom's "method" of teaching was, in a certain sense, quite simple. First he would make us aware of our deepest concerns and of the questions we cared about most. Then he would show us that the classics addressed those concerns and spoke to our questions. And then he would leave it to us to find our own way through those books and to discover their treasures on our own and for ourselves. He really was, as he once wrote, "the matchmaker, setting up the meeting of reader and book, to be forgotten after the marriage." But we could not and cannot forget the man who made our happy unions possible.

In order to make this "method" work, Bloom had to know his students well. He had to know where we were at and where we were coming from, both collectively and individually. And he had to divine where and how far we might go. He acquired this knowledge, most simply, by spending time with us, by chatting with us, and, above all, by listening to us. No human being ever loved to talk as much as Allan Bloom did, but no one could get young people to open up and talk so freely about themselves as he could. In class, he would ask simple, irresistible questions: What do you expect to get out of your years in the university? What are your favorite books? Who are your heroes? Out of class, he would ask us about politics, sports, movies, music, and ourselves. At first it was easy to talk to him because he was interested in everything and because he so evidently enjoyed

schmoozing with students. Later, it was easy because you always felt that he understood you in particular, that he understood, and helped you to understand, your strengths and weaknesses, your hopes and fears, your limits and possibilities. And even when listening to him speak to an audience of fifty or sixty or more, you often had the eerie feeling that he was speaking directly and especially to you.

Allan Bloom was also, and by design, an infuriating teacher. Invariably, he would provoke our indignation by daring to question one of our sacred beliefs. Why not censorship? he would demand. Why not communism? Why not inequality? These questions could stir up real anger, and now that I am a teacher I marvel at the courage he showed by raising such questions so forcefully. But these were the tools he used to pry open our minds. Before we could study the classics in a meaningful way, before we could take seriously the possibility that we might learn from them, we had to see that our own beliefs were questionable and that there might be others worthy of consideration. We had to see and to feel for ourselves the powerful reasons for doubting our own opinions. We had to feel in our bones that we did not really know what we thought we knew. By challenging us so forcefully, then, Bloom was giving us a lesson, sometimes painful, in self-awareness. But, almost always, this pain was followed by a certain feeling of liberation and by the pleasure of truly learning that there are other ways of seeing and living than those we had previously known and that those ways might be better than our own.

While the experience of studying with Allan Bloom was often earth-shaking and dizzying, it was also, and above all, enormously fun. He was fond of saying that the most important questions must be approached with a proper mixture of levity and gravity, but he always betrayed an unmistakable preference for levity. And while he wrote most beautifully and most profoundly about tragedy, especially about *Othello*, he simply adored comedy and he was the most explosively funny man one could ever hope to meet.

One of the most pleasant experiences we had in his classes was that of making friends. Friendship was a central theme of the books Bloom taught, so we students naturally spent a lot of time talking and thinking about the problems of human separateness, of community,

and of love. But as we discussed such problems in and out of class, arguing with and learning from each other over coffee, at meals, and on street corners, we found ourselves becoming friends. We discovered the distinctive pleasures of friendship based on the common investigation of such questions as, what is a friend? I found my first true friends in those classes and it is thanks to them and thanks to him that I have some sense of what it means to have and to be a friend.

For all of his flamboyance and panache, Allan Bloom was a deeply modest man—in my opinion, unduly modest. He always denied that there was any trace of greatness in him and he always directed our minds away from himself and toward the great thinkers of the distant and recent past. He was proudest of and encouraged us to admire most those students of his who were least dependent on him. He always presented himself to us as a medium through which we might gain access to teachers infinitely wiser and greater than he. By introducing us to the enduring and relatively self-sufficient pleasures of studying with such teachers, he prepared us for the day when we would leave his classes to make our own way in the world. And in this way he also prepared us for the day when he would leave our company, to be with us no more.

Allan Bloom would surely disapprove if we were to say of him, as young Phaedo said of Socrates, that remembering him is always for us the most pleasant of things. I can hear him accusing us of mistaking the pleasures of friendship for the highest pleasures and of mistaking an ordinary man for an extraordinary one, a dwarf for a giant. But he was an extraordinary man—a great teacher—and we still have much to learn from him. Fortunately for us who knew him and miss him so, and also for those who did not know him at all, he may still be found, ready to argue and to teach, in the recollections of his friends and his students, in the essays and books he left behind, and in the books he spent his life bringing to life.

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