

Berta Rantz: Her Life and Legacy

By Rasjidah Franklin

One's life is shaped by many things: circumstances of birth, parenting, geography, social and political events, economic status, and more. What we do with those influences, the way we interact with them and construct their meaning determines the day to day living we do and the legacy we leave.¹ Berta Rantz left a legacy of understanding education as process, not just measurable products. This is a glimpse of her life and legacy as she told them to me in a series of interviews in 1993.

Berta Rantz was 99 years old when I first interviewed her. We spent the better part of a year meeting for a few hours a month. I edited and helped in publishing a book for her, *Dramatics in Creative Education*, which introduced readers to the philosophy of creative education and the psychology of child-centered teaching. This work offers a rationale for dramatics in the classroom and explores correlations among dramatics, behavior, and other subjects taught in a comprehensive school. While writing this book, I came to learn much about her life and about the Progressive Education movement of which she was an integral part.

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Berta Rantz began teaching in a one-room country school in the forests of Puget Sound. After a short time in San Francisco's public schools, she moved to New York to become part of the vital 1920s progressive education movement. There she joined the faculty of Walden School that was then the pace setter in the experimental and creative education movement. She stayed for the next 26 years teaching and later directing the high school. In the fall of 1951, at the age of

Berta Rantz

58, Rantz left Walden to join another new experiment in education, Stockbridge School, an international, interracial, intercultural boarding school in Interlaken, Massachusetts. At this coeducational school for world understanding, she was assistant director, teacher, and finally educational consultant until her retirement at age 82. She continued her avid interest in education and was frequently visited by former students who assured her of her lasting influence on their lives. Among her legions of former students are those who went on to fame and fortune, including Chevy Chase, historian Barbara Tuchman, theatre director Mike Nichols, and musician Arlo Guthrie. She was visited by many of her former students at her 100th birthday party. There she told them, "I have had a very rich and productive life. How? Because I am surrounded by people who want to create. ... You gave to me and I gave to you, so it's been a good exchange and a good life. How about that?" (*Contra Costa Times*, 1993)

Berta Rantz died in January of 1994, at the age of 100. This is her story.

Beginnings

"My parents were Russian Jews. My uncle had come to this country first and called himself Rantz because it was a safer name to use. My older brother and sister left Russia in 1884, and they were on the go. My mother and father moved from place to place, too, because of what the Russians had done to Jews. You know about the pogroms, under the Czar; there were those awful anti-Jewish periods. They always felt they were in danger of being executed. Finally, after Mother gave birth, they got on a ship to America, traveling in steerage. These were not the best accommodations for a family with a 3-week-old child. They were fed rotten fish in steerage. My father, who was very strong intellectually, went up to the captain to complain. The captain took the fish out of his hand and slapped him across the face with it. It was a hard journey, but we stayed alive, and finally we were in America.

"Here it was hard, too. My father would take any kind of work to earn his way. As children we knew poverty intimately. We knew what it was to go without a meal, but nothing ever frightened us. The point is not merely that our parents must have suffered, but that suffering was passed on to us as children as a real challenge to become something. We had so many difficulties in my childhood that I learned to never be afraid of anything.

"In 1899, I began school at the age of six. As Russian Jewish immigrants, our language was Russian. My father often complained about the 'idiocies' of English, he wanted us all to learn the language immediately. He would always say, 'Speak English, speak English, speak English, you have to become American.' After I went to school I often looked up words for him in the dictionary while he was reading. My mother had a much harder time learning the English language. She could read and write in Russian beautifully, but for most of her life I leaned over her shoulder correcting her painstaking English writing.

“When I was a child in school in Illinois, we were the poor immigrants. The people in the last row who were never being paid attention to. When I was asked to pass out pencils or paper I looked at the way the classroom was organized—in ways that favored some students over others. I early learned that this was wrong and that became part of my philosophy—that no one should be left out of the educational process. Authority is power. Teachers sometimes misunderstand that.

“As a freshman in Philadelphia High School for Girls, I found that there were more ways than one to teach and learn Algebra. The first was the teacher’s scholarly process with its vocabulary of abstractions; the second was the practical way the students helped each other to understand. That, too, influenced my teaching philosophy in later years.

“We were very poor, as I told you before. When my sister was in the 8th grade, she took a six-week course in bookkeeping and got a job in a grocery store as a clerk. She was only 15 but said she was 18. My father got jobs wherever he could and my sister helped support the family. Because she could help, I went to high school but she never did. I didn’t want to be a teacher then, but I didn’t want to be a sales girl in a five-and-dime store either. So, when I did get a chance to go to a two-year normal school in Philadelphia, I took it. That meant that in two years I would be earning my living and helping to support the family. But in December we moved to San Francisco. My brothers were making some money out there and they could give the family some support if we moved. So I wound up at San Francisco State Normal School. (At that time the area was dedicated to the name of Frederick Burke, who was the head of the normal school in San Francisco. He was greatly admired. In an article I wrote, I said he was a remarkable man, funny, tubby. He was wonderful and he understood what education was really about. I got the notion from him that the teacher should be a source, an author, not a authority.)

“I do not know what four years of college might have led to, but I was eager to earn my living. So after two years of normal school I was certificated as a teacher. My first job was in a one-room country school on Puget Sound. There were 26 boys and girls who had come to me out of the meager life of immigrant families of Norwegian farmers and fishermen and this simple fact made me a teacher. These children found in the 20 year-old woman a knowledge of far places, real and literary, a love of children, and a joy in work. Going to school to teach every day became a self-replenishing spring. They thirsted, and they were refreshed. And so was I. These children taught me about the sternly beautiful shapes of human relationships where daily life is unadorned. I learned from my four years teaching in rural schools that physical discomfort and lack of intellectual stimulation did not hamper the creative life. Limitations, hardships fostered inventiveness. The imaginative could use every bit of everything in the environment.

“At my first job in that one-room school in Washington state, I once kept a boy after school to punish him. Then he punished me by refusing to go home. We both learned about the inherent humanity of one another. I’ll never forget the experience.

Here I was at 20 years old with a boy whom I had kept after school. You make them do Arithmetic-right? So he is doing Arithmetic and I am feeling very self-conscious up at my desk correcting papers and after 15 minutes, I noticed it was getting darker. I said, 'Richard, I kept you after school to punish you and you can go now.' He said, 'You kept me after school and I'm not going.' I thought what will I do now? 'Richard will you please close your book and go home now?' He responded, 'You kept me after school and I am not going home.' After a few minutes I realized that I had to touch the student as an individual. He was simply using the opportunity to learn to become himself. I think that makes a difference. I believe that you can learn what it means to recognize a human being's need to become a person.

"When I returned to San Francisco I went through the wing-clipping and discouragement of three awful semesters teaching in the city schools. One principal disliked me, frightened and discouraged me. But then another believed in me and said I should get out of the system and follow my desire to find greatness through teaching.

"There had been a beginning of Experimental Schools in the East before World War I. I had had a little contact with this when Eastern educators spoke at teachers' institutes. I also knew something of the impact of Freud on developments in American psychology. Creative education was a reality. In Hollywood, Leah Press Lovell, fresh from her work in New York was teaching a group of children. I left my job to work as her assistant. I found her to be a gifted, intelligent visionary who could use my practical experience. She would teach me rational methods for creative learning in Math and Science, Social Studies, Poetry, and Dramatics. Unfortunately, our experiment collapsed from lack of funds but I had had one year with her. Then there were the setbacks because many of the private schools would not hire me because I was Jewish. I thought I wasn't going to teach any more.

"I heard about a school in the east, a beginning of Progressive Education. I went to New York. But I couldn't get a job, so I took a job in a New Jersey school and they gave me a peculiarly mixed class of difficult children in the sixth grade. One day I needed to speak with the school nurse, so I left the students at 9:00AM to go see the nurse. As I returned, I saw the principal coming down the stairs and looking at me very sternly. He said, 'What makes you think you can leave those children alone and they will do anything?' I was so surprised. Then he smiled and said, 'They're working, what have you done?'

"I came to New York on weekends and one night at dinner I met a woman whose children went to the children's school that I had read about. The name was eventually changed to the Walden School. This was in 1923. I knew I couldn't stay in New York because I didn't have any money, but I loved being in New York, and attending the theatre. Anyway I went to have an interview and they immediately talked to me about grades and my previous experiences. They apologized for the salary, only \$2,000 a year. I laughed because then I was making \$1,500. The school was already nine years old when I came there. Now Walden School no longer exists,

but there is a group of graduates who are doing a history of the school because they felt it was important in the whole story of Progressive Education.

“There had been a man at Walden from Germany. That was Hans Maeder. Before Walden he had been in exile always in flight, circling the globe writing for the anti-Nazi underground, working with children whenever possible. He went to Pearl Harbor after the Japanese bombing in 1941, to help out the people who had been hurt. He was arrested because he was German. By the time he was freed from prison in this country, I was head of the high school at Walden. He had come there as a German teacher. When he left Walden, he started the Stockbridge School and an entire coeducational, intercultural movement. Modern education started in Germany, for there was a lot of experimental education in Germany after World War I. Before the rise of Hitler, Hans Maeder, the young Social Democrat, had known that he would one day found his School for Education in World Understanding. The Stockbridge School is that school.

“I was becoming disenchanted with what was now going on at Walden so I quit. He asked me to join him at the new school. I agreed to go for a year. I was already 57 years old. I no longer wanted to be a teacher, but I did join the Stockbridge School the next year. At this coeducational boarding high school, I came to know a number of things that I thought I had learned long before: international, interracial, and intercultural are much more of life when the people come from many regions and from varying societies and share place, work, and living, every day. In a community like Stockbridge, the cycle of acceptance and rejection, of belonging and withdrawing is quite another matter from that of the intellectually acceptable give-and-take in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of New York. In areas other than those of nation, race, culture, there is equally the constant need for respect and self-respect. Mutual trust is slowly acquired, and grows out of self-awareness and appreciation for differences, even when those differences are disturbing. During my 16 years at Stockbridge I learned that creation is never done; the classroom is forever young because classroom life is forever becoming. Happily, I found I was still a teacher.”

An Evolving Philosophy of Education

“A good teacher uses everything and is used by everything and everybody. It is a good feeling to be well used. I would never destroy a student’s faith in what she was doing. I was teacher of English but also Assistant Director. We also took in teachers as new assistants and therefore I was training teachers at the same time that I was learning to become a better one.

“You know, when a child is just learning to walk, you can’t stop him. The body wants to walk. It is inevitable. He falls down, he gets up and tries again, because he is destined to walk. That desire to become is innate in the human being. Yet, you can destroy it by saying, ‘Don’t you do that, you are a bad little boy,’ instead of

seeing the child as a person who is becoming. This was something I learned and it remained with me as the basis of my whole philosophy of education.

“An example of education as ‘becoming’ happened at the Stockbridge boarding school. One time I was being very hard on a girl. I was scolding her and she said, ‘Don’t you shake your head at me you old hag.’ Now, another teacher at another time might have expelled her, but she had caught my attention. I followed her as she went stomping back to her room. And I said, ‘Look, you don’t like what you are doing any more than I do,’ and she stopped. She recognized me as another person trying to become. Walden school, when I was there, embodied that philosophy. I had a young woman who was a teacher trainee and she didn’t see why she should have to follow the clock. It was that whole idea of freedom. The thing that went wrong with modern education was when children were free to chose anything anytime without a structure. Freedom works so long as there is a philosophy of structure, so long as there remains a sense of responsibility for human choices.

“I began teaching when I was 20 years old and I quit connections with any school when I was 82, so I was in education a long time. Still, I have no pension. I didn’t apply for a pension when I was in public school until it was too late, but I did have Social Security. My nephew and his wife will have this house when I pass on. I would never marry. If I ever had children they would be illegitimate. But I have children from all over the world. I got a telephone call the other day from a guy who graduated Stockbridge in 1962, and now he was in Hollywood making a picture. He had been a funny kid and did not seem very promising. We took a group of students to Europe in 1961 for a year of study, analyzing a small town outside of Paris. It was so exciting when we discovered such things as long rows of French bread. This kid grabbed one of those loaves of bread and went down the street waving it like a wand. It was wonderful. You cannot know what children are capable of. The important thing is to help the child to discover that he has a self. Then you must not use your authority to tell him how to grow.

“I do not think we are ‘born teachers.’ We learn to be teachers. One can learn what teaching is about. The mistake is made in the mediation of authority. The teacher is an author—a source. An authority is power. That is the fundamental notion. Teachers are limited in their power over students.

“We do not know what we know until we have articulated it. Knowledge has no value until it has been placed in relation to someone, until it has become something to be given and taken. But there is no meaning in giving, unless what we give can be received. If the giving is unsuitable, the gift is unsuitable, then the behavior is awkward and the participants are embarrassed. A relationship does not mean that you possess the other person. It means a constant recognition of oneself and of the relationship with the other person.

“When someone is stimulated by a group and gives, through his feeling/ connection with them, let us say, of his humor, is loved by the others, who are grateful

for the fun. But if, unaware of what the others are waiting for, and over-anxious, over-active, exhibitionistic, he cracks his foolish joke, he becomes only unpleasant, a burden to his self-conscious and accusing mates.

“To participate, to do one’s share in the life of a group, is happiness for the individual. Children who can sense the feelings of others, knowing when to move forward or to withdraw, who can contribute the fruit of their thinking when ideas are in the making, who can move with energy and constructive skill in the world of things, truly give and receive.

“There is a happy interaction between individual and group. When the children produce things, it becomes so satisfying that there is confusion in the minds of many people (and in the minds of many teachers) over the relative importance of the educational process. Exhibitions of children’s paintings, sculpture and crafts, publications of their stories, poems, and plays have been so delightful to adults that these adults have immediately become the victims of their own misinterpretations, confusing as they compare the pleasing visible results of the child’s growing with the achievements of the adult artist and writer. There are factors in this growing that, unlike the accumulation of knowledge and of practical skills, escape measurement. We see the results of these imponderables in the vigor or decency or charm of daily life. There are no tangibles to show. We can record an act that reveals improved understanding of human relations. But after it has served its purpose for the child, we have nothing left except improved human relations—good to have—but not something that can be hung up on the wall or wrapped up as a gift.

“The process of education is what matters. The achievement, struggled for, fostered, loved, is only something on the way to the next phase of the process. Honest effort should be respected. Because it is beautiful work it is admired, but more importantly, as something learned it forms a sound basis from which to move. It is in its fluid relation rather than in its property of being a finished thing that its value lies.

“As Walden teachers, we all took Art, Dance, Creative Dramatics; we had the same experiences that the students had. We were all growing teachers, working out our own problems. One of the influences, of course, was Freudian analysis. We had an advisor who was a Freudian, she would sit in our staff meetings as we talked about children and motivation and impulses and so on. All of our staff meetings were open confrontations with one another’s point of view about a child. We would ask one another in discussion, ‘This one is getting along fine with this child and this one is not, what is going on?’ Or, ‘I hired a new teacher. He is a wonderful mathematician and the children are having a terrible time learning from him. I called him and talked about it.’ I said to him, ‘Look you’re teaching Mathematics, but you’re forgetting that what you are really doing is teaching children.’ Even in high school, they are still young people on the way to becoming adults. And to just say, ‘No you’ve got it wrong’ is not helpful.”

A Teacher's Teacher: Advice and Evidence

“What would I say to teachers in today’s inner city schools? First of all, you have to be without fear. Second, you have to know that originally the life force in each child wants to continue to grow grow grow, but fear and violence all around him make him close in on himself so all he can do is defend himself. Growth is not in self-defense. Growth is in openness, in freedom. I don’t know what I would do in the classroom today. Let me tell you something though. I had a job one time in San Francisco in a school for so-called incorrigible boys. The director of that school behaved like Il Duce. She would embarrass students in front of the whole school. I was a teacher and also in charge of their athletics and I had no problem at all with those boys. Again, it was my original instinct of being able to recognize that each individual wants to become a person and the teacher’s task is to find a way whereby you can help him in that process. One boy was angry with me one day and he started to hit me with his fists. I put my hand on his arm, and he saw then that he didn’t have to do that. I think these simple behaviors can be taught to teachers.

“When working with inner city children, we need to look for places where they have been injured and find ways to help heal it. You can never say, ‘It is too late. I’m too old to know.’ When I was a little child I felt so bad about those children in the last row who never got to do anything. In the first row, number one and number two, did everything, but they were presumed to be the best students and the others were thought to be dumb.

“Students who make up a group bring to it their unlikeness: in physique, in background and interests, in the varied resources of their personalities. They come together to work from these, finding unity in difference. In this duality of unity and difference is one of the best fruits of freedom and creativity. The recognition of its values produces a broader fearlessness, carrying implications for understanding the world outside the classroom.

“Fear in the expression of self, fear of, and prejudice against the expression of strangers, these all have robbed us on every hand. Because we are ourselves unsure, we have struck out at whatever in its difference reminded us of our own insecurity. In the familiar, we always find our protection. Unfamiliar contours of face or of social habit, unaccustomed sounds, strange sequence of idea or idiom, however well they might be ordered according to their own systems, tend to be disturbing to us. We could make excursions into the enjoyment of the exotic or the adventurous when these were safely distant, but when the foreign intrude upon daily life, we resort to the blinding defense of prejudice.

“What would I say to beginning teachers? First of all, as teachers we should mistrust uniformity in the classroom. To be sure, convenient routines save time and energy. There is no hurt to individuality if there is a pattern to follow in carrying out some procedures. Whether it is a matter of the five year-olds putting away their

blocks, or of the high school students making out program cards, or of standing in line in the cafeteria, in these, the reason for the uniform behavior is the better order of the whole group and will result in the greater productivity of the individual. However, this order need not blind us to the value of variation and originality in graphic and verbal forms. In elementary and high school classes, for example, the possibilities for the development of original form in research (varieties of plan, of courses), in note-taking (outlines, diagrams, summaries, questions), in illustration (sketches, photographs, dialogues, objects, maps) are limitless in their combinations. No single teacher, however skilled at initiating projects, could possibly think of all the things that a class might do in these ways. Teachers who have seen the possibilities will not want to curtail this abundance by insistence upon a patterned presentation of material.

“While the democracies of the world are struggling to preserve the freedom of the individual, and working at the same time to strengthen the organization of society, the schools of the democracies must educate their students to the full and balanced use of their powers. They must call upon all resources which their student communities have and they must use such educational means as will constantly call upon the students’ ability to function freely within the organization. The making of a play, for example, is a creative means in democratic education. If the way in which a group works is not wholly democratic to begin with, it must become so by the very nature of the work in its progress.

“Finally, there is no single way to teach. If there is one basic principle, it is that teaching is the act of bringing student and material into relation. There is no single way to learn, but there is something in the child’s nature, or in his previous experience, or in his wishes for the future to which the thing to be learned can be linked. The way between the objective material and the child’s interest must be kept open. Teachers should be concerned with not just how much is he learning, but how is he learning?”

Berta’s Legacy

Teachers and parents alike can learn from this great teacher and philosopher of education. Her understanding of education as process, of learning as becoming and of the teacher as a source, an author, not as an authority reflect the lessons she learned in her 62 years of teaching. The depth of this remarkable woman’s own development was evident in her description of human development in terms so simple, yet so difficult to duplicate.

For Berta Rantz, her profound love and acceptance of other human beings began with her being the daughter of immigrants, a member of a minority group, who took hardship and suffering as a challenge not as defeat. In her work at Walden School, she demonstrated the importance of the school being a place where one can be oneself, of personal growth happening best in an atmosphere of openness and

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freedom. In sixteen years at Stockbridge she manifested her social and political philosophy of tolerance and acceptance.

Berta Rantz was a master teacher who lived over 100 years, to die in January, 1994, brilliant, wise, courageous, a faithful teacher to the end. To infer from all that Berta said, I might sum up for her: 'It is in the fluid relationships of life that there is meaning, not in the finished product.' I have the sense that Berta lives on, that her teaching will never be finished.

Note

1. This comes from the concept of social reality expressed by Berger and Luckman (1966) when they wrote that behavior is not governed by an "objective reality out there" but by the "reality" that is experienced and interpreted.

References

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