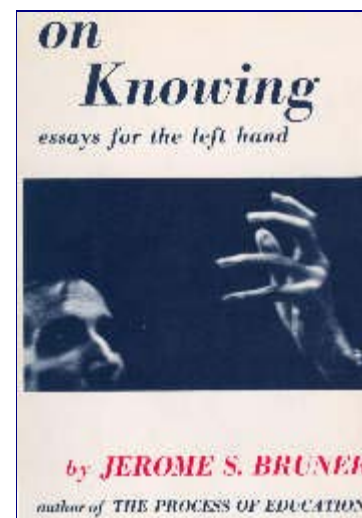


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A READER'S JOURNAL
On Knowing
by
Jerome Bruner
Essays for the Left Hand
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©1999



There is a type of paradoxical intent that every teacher confronts, either consciously or unconsciously. It goes like this: show your students exactly how to construct a reality on their own terms. If you succeed at getting them to construct a reality the way you showed them, then you've failed because they will be doing it your way and thus constructing a reality on *your* terms, not *theirs*. Just how unconscious this paradoxical intent is in our society is well illustrated by the instructions I saw emblazoned on the front of a Betty Crocker® Cake Mix box many years ago: "Be Creative! And here's How You Do It!" But Jerome Bruner, undaunted by the paradoxical nature of his task, devotes the first part of his book to the nature of, "how we lead the learner to construct a reality on his own terms."

[page 5] I have felt that the self-imposed fetish of objectivity has kept us from developing a needed genre of psychological writing - call it protopsychological writing if you will - the preparatory intellectual and emotional labors on which our later, more formalized, efforts are based. The genre in its very nature is literary and metaphoric, yet it is something more than this. It inhabits a realm midway between the humanities and the sciences. It is the left hand trying to transmit to the right.

The reason for the paradox is that the left hand's way of knowing things is different from the right hand's way of knowing. The difference can be discerned in the design of a piano - the lower notes are to the left, so that the bass notes that are mostly used for harmony and tempo are played by the left hand and the right hand tackles the melody. The simultaneous striking of multiple keys to form chords with the left versus the sequential ordering of chords into melody by the right hand. Both are required for a pleasing musical composition and both styles of thinking, holistic and sequential, left and right hand thinking, are required for effective teaching.

Both are required for every great work of art.

[page 14] What is characteristic of the great work of art is that its metaphoric artifice, its juxtapositions, have not only surprise value but also illuminating novelty. The two combine to create what we shall later refer to as "effective surprise."

This is Bruner's way of saying that "art is the process of destruction of sameness" as I have written elsewhere. "The road to banality is paved with creative intentions," Bruner says (page 18), and just as the instructions on the cake mix box, the banality shows up in replication and kitsch. One sameness that has handicapped our ability to understand healthy human mental functioning is that scientists for the most part have studied in detail those with less than normal mental functioning, up until now.

[page 15] It is difficult to catch and record, no less to understand, the swift flight of man's mind operating at its best.

He seems to be saying that we can only capture the halt and the lame products of the human mind, up until now. Only by raising our eyes and our aspirations can we begin to understand, with our right and left ways of knowing, the truly remarkable flights of the human mind from now on.

Many of those remarkable flights of fancy are in churches.

[page 17] In periods during which man saw himself in the image of God, the creation of works *ad majorem gloriam dei* could provide a sufficient rationale for the dignity of the artist, the artisan.

Fresh back from a trip the Rhine valley in Germany, where I visited many very old churches, I wondered why I didn't see any very old museums. Then it dawned on me: at that time, the only museums were the churches and the only art was religious art. Museums were a more recent invention of humanity when art was created that was not appropriate for churches.

There is much in this book about art and how human beings create art. One can tell that an artistic nature infuses Jerome Bruner in his searching for methods of educating ourselves and others as we move into the next century.

[page 116] No person is master of the whole culture; indeed, this is almost a defining characteristic of that form of social memory that we speak of as culture. Each man lives a fragment of it. To be whole, he must create his own version of the world, using that part of his cultural heritage he has made his own through education.

In our time, the requirements of technology constrain the freedom of the individual to create images of the world that are satisfying in the deepest sense.

[page 165] What we have now is a new frontier, a frontier for the full use of human beings. Perhaps I reveal my biases as a psychologist when I say that the cultivation of this frontier excites me far more than the prospects of exploring empty space.

