

Kazimierz Dabrowski – 1902-1980

The following five articles represent various personal views of Kazimierz Dabrowski, whose theory of Positive Disintegration has, in recent years, attracted world-wide attention.

In Search of Kazimierz Dabrowski

This is the final installment of a three-part article on Dr. Dabrowski, visiting professor at the University of Alberta until his death last year, and author of the Theory of Positive Disintegration.

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It will be a very long time, if ever, before the final verdict is in on the value of Dr. Dabrowski's understanding of the human psyche. Some psychologists criticize his theory for being too simplistic. Repelled by the need for a new vocabulary, they suspect that Dabrowski may have possessed some personal magic not readily translatable into the practice of the journeyman therapist. Yet others are attracted to Dabrowski's theory because of its very humanistic, perhaps even idealistic view of man. Are we merely a pause in the evolutionary spiral or "just a little lower than the angels"?

Perhaps seventy-eight years is too brief a time in which to unravel human complexity. Dabrowski himself appears to have been a driven man, consumed by the need to give form to his ideas, not altogether happy or at peace and far from satisfied with his life's work. He endured persecution, imprisonment, obscurity and eventual separation from the people and the homeland which he loved. Yet, like a true survivor, he made the best use of what fate had to offer him: some of which, like the affection and admiration which shine from the epitaphs which follow this article, must have added much sweetness to his final years. In retrospect, perhaps his most permanent achievement will be the inspiration he gave to those who spent time with him. Now it is the task of these friends, admirers, disciples and colleagues to insure that his ideas are not only preserved but explored and expanded. It is Kazimierz Dabrowski's turn to rest from his labours.

*And I shall have some peace there, for
peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of morning to
where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a
purple glow,
And evening full of linnet's wings.*

*I will arise and go now, for always night and
day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds
by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the
pavements gray,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.*

William Butler Yeats

Dabrowski – An Extraordinary Man Marlene D. Rankel, Ph.D.

*To be authentic does not mean to be
natural, to be as you are, but as you
ought to be.*

K. Dabrowski (trans. by Paul Cienin),
Existential Thoughts and Aphorisms,
1972, p. 22.

In 1968 I found, quite by accident, a copy of the strange little book called *Positive Disintegration*, published by Little, Brown and Co. in 1964. The title intrigued me. What could be positive about falling apart, about feeling that your life and its contents were as unruly as the contents of an over-packed suitcase, one which was always threatening to spring open and reveal the mess that was your life?

The author, a Dr. K. Dabrowski, made a lot of negative things seem positive—positive regression, positive frustration, positive infantilism, positive maladjustment. What kind of theory was this? He had my attention.

What was my initial understanding of the theory of Positive Disintegration? First and foremost, Dabrowski was rejecting the popular notion that 'reality' was defined by either totalitarian or majority rule, but that there were, in his opinion, levels of 'reality', each very real to the individual existing in that reality. Higher levels could perceive lower levels, but not vice versa, which might explain the frustration one feels when having one's reality dismissed by a blind man, so to speak. Secondly, Dabrowski talked about overexcitabilities, which he defined as a "consistent tendency to over-react". This put a new slant on things—could it be that an argument could be made that those who level the charge could themselves be charged with "under-reacting"? Could perhaps those same individuals who failed to perceive subtle realities also fail to perceive the reasons for the re-sternation of the persons living and "over-reacting" in those more subtle realities? Now here was a theory that would tilt the world on its axis, if not set it on its ear. Formerly 'invisible' persons, with their 'invisible reasons for doing what they do' would now become visible.

Not so. Dabrowski and his theory were dismissed by individuals at lower levels of reality in the academic world. Wherever Dabrowski went, in his lifetime, he was seen as 'different', 'eccentric', a 'quack', a 'madman', or a 'magician'. Teaching positions were not his for the asking. The media

did not beat a path to his door. All of this was as Dabrowski himself would have predicted it to be. He counted on the support of those who shared his perceptions as a result of their own life experiences. Temporarily, he often had the support of individuals who perceived his theory intellectually, but could not sustain their understanding emotionally and eventually either fell away or turned against him, having used or abused him, sometimes both.

In this theory, Dabrowski claimed that to be fully human was not at all natural, did not happen by chance. In fact, to become human, one has to go against one's nature, which, at its biological level, is instinctive and animalistic. If one breaks free of this factor in development, this biological determinism, one is then determined by societal expectations, a stage comparable to animals in a zoo, all seemingly mild and well-trained, but only because of the bars. This second factor, social determinism, is a cage also to be broken out of if one is to become fully human. Only when one is no longer in need of social 'bars' can the third factor, mental determinism, be seen to be operating. These 'bars' are broken by the individual, one by one, and it is he who lets himself out of the cage of existence and who begins to live, fully, authentically, truly human.

*The authentic in a man is not the animal,
but the man.*

Existential Thoughts and Aphorisms,
1972, p. 23.

Critics of the theory ask "Is he saying some people are *better* than others—is that what he means by *levels* of reality?" (with ill-concealed annoyance). (How dare he?) (Jung, too, was charged with having an elitist theory, with being aristocratic—a charge to which Jung replied—"Nature is aristocratic, not I. I simply comment on it.") And yes, Dr. Dabrowski, too, is saying that some persons are more human than others, are more conscious, more aware and concerned about others, more decent, more sensitive, more loving, more compassionate, more altruistic, more courageous. Here, in fact, we have the unsung heroes, for their finer qualities are abused and abased by those who lack the same qualities, in an effort to destroy higher realities, realities which, in comparison, reveal the abusers' animality.

*In the world ruled as it is now there must
arise very many psychoneuroses. In this
world nervous persons must be nervous be-
cause the lower level controls the higher
one. What a great gulf between these levels
—the masters of this world do not know*

that the reality of psychoneurotics which they suppress and subordinate is such a high reality.

Existential Thoughts and Aphorisms,
1972, p. 33.

What is the main ingredient, you might ask, in becoming more human? Dabrowski states that it is a path not open to all. Just as some individuals are constitutionally mentally deficient, others, he claims, are emotionally deficient. These emotional retardates are incapable of benefiting from or learning to give humane treatment. In spite of their own nastiness to others (gross and brutal if the intelligence is low, subtle and cruel if the intelligence is high), these morally deficient individuals do not learn to return kindness for kindness. Instead, they take loving behavior as their due and return abuse as the answer, counting on the sensitivity of the other to shield them from their consequences.

And this is what we often see, claims Dabrowski—psychopaths using and abusing more sensitive individuals (psychoneurotics, in Dabrowski's terminology)—each attributing to the other their own motives for behavior. And thus do psychopaths 'use up' sensitive persons in their milieu—in fact, if they are intelligent and keenly perceptive, they surround themselves with psychoneurotics so that they never have to face and alter themselves.

After having read his book, I met Dr. Dabrowski one day in 1968. I did not know who he was, but, as I was crossing the campus of the University of Alberta one cold winter day, a small man dressed in black, and wearing a black tam on his head, was coming toward me. To my surprise, this man gave off the same vibrations I had felt when reading the book *Positive Disintegration*. I began to make inquiries, asking if anyone knew the author of the book. At first, no one did. Then I heard a rumour that he was here in Edmonton, in fact, on the campus, teaching a course with the Department of Psychology. I described the person I had seen to my 'informant', and discovered it was indeed him. To this day I am unable to explain this phenomenon satisfactorily to anyone but myself. (If pressed for an explanation, I would give one).

That was the beginning. I lost no time in seeking him out. He invited me to attend discussions in which his latest book was being criticized by a group of colleagues and interested students. He became, and remained for me my mentor until he died, twelve years later.

How did he affect me? How did he influence me? How was he so unusual? For me, the main 'difference' between Dr. Dabrowski and almost every other person I knew was his capacity to work. Along with this went a remarkable understanding of his fellow man, a good will towards those who challenged, criticized and even condemned him (for me, from my viewpoint, at times a pathological tolerance for discourtesy), and a love for his fellow man which was and remained real even for his so-called 'enemies'. More concretely, even under stress, I never saw Dr. Dabrowski use another person's behavior as an excuse for his own response. His reactions were conscious, deliberate, and full of compassion. The most biting thing I ever heard him say was in response to a particularly arrogant, demanding student who kept asking Dabrowski to give him an answer in terms he (the student) could understand. After extreme provocation, and even then with a smile of love and not superiority on his face, Dr. Dabrowski said "If I said what I am saying so that you could understand it, I would not be saying what I am saying." The student heard but did not feel the sting. Like good Eastern gurus, Dabrowski ever struck his students blows only with feathers.

When I say that Dr. Dabrowski was an extraordinary man, I mean that in the sense that he was *very, very ordinary*.

Humility is a feeling of inferiority—not only in relation to others and to one's own weaknesses and faults but also in relation to the all-encompassing human ignorance, powerlessness, suffering and defenselessness.

Existential Thoughts and Aphorisms,
1972, p. 30.

And I found Dr. Dabrowski to be a very humble man. He worked as hard as or harder than anyone he ever worked with, always did his share and more. He was not rich—in fact, I believe he was what could be called a poor man, financially speaking. He walked to campus, summer and winter. His clothes were simple and seldom drew one's attention. If they did, it was likely because of a subtle mis-match which somehow added to his personal dignity. He never 'hung out' at the Faculty Club, although he was not averse to having a drink if it manifested in increased rather than decreased consciousness in the ensuing conversation. His idea of taking a break was changing his task. When he was extremely tense, he walked ("Would Madame care to promenade?")

For a number of years, Dr. Dabrowski had a double appointment, part-time with

the Department of Psychology at the U. of A., and part-time with the Department of Psychology at the University of Laval in Quebec. Although he spoke English quite well, Dr. Dabrowski always felt his English was a burden to the listener. For this reason, and because he spoke French better, he did most of his counselling in Quebec. While in Edmonton, he devoted himself to research and writing, mainly. One of the busiest times was when he was awarded a Canada Council Research grant which extended over three years, from 1969 to 1972. During this period of time, he travelled between Edmonton and Quebec, always taking a night flight so that he would not miss a day's work. Here he was, twice and three times the age of his students and researchers, and he could work rings around us. I can remember how relieved we would be, initially, when he first left for Quebec. After about a week of relaxation, we gathered ourselves together, and by the time he was about to return, we were in full force. Not one of us failed to be impressed by Dr. Dabrowski's ability to work long, hard hours.

I recall watching Dr. Dabrowski and his Polish secretary work. He would walk and dictate his books, and she would type furiously. I marvelled at their ability to work together in this manner. Dabrowski always needed a good secretary, and preferably two if she could not speak and write, fluently, at least two or three languages. Because his works were originally in Polish, and later translated into French, English and Spanish, he had to rely on others. I remember one translation of one of his works, done by a hard-working student who obviously got lost in the terminology of the theory. Dr. Dabrowski used to use 'basical' for basic, but, throughout this one manuscript, the word 'bicycle' came up time and again, obviously just one of the many words the sense of which the student failed to see. Dr. Dabrowski had some phrases which we, his students and researchers, lovingly used, in his absence. For instance, when faced with something paradoxical, or hypocritical, Dr. Dabrowski would look around in genuine astonishment (he never tried to fool anybody; his goal was communication) and say "what *means* this?" When faced with the explanation, which didn't really explain anything, because the communication was meant to confuse, not clarify, Dr. Dabrowski would shrug his shoulders, smile, and say "Nothing to do." Those two phrases alone had tided many of us over many a bad moment.

What kind of man was he? He was a walking example of his own theory, a man who had transcended his biological and social determinism. (Some drink when they're thirsty; others drink when there's water—he fell in the latter category.) Though he dearly loved Poland, he did not love nationalism, for he was an internationalist, opposed to wars and would speak against his own country when it was too nationalistic. He was an alien in every country, but a citizen of the world. His theory attracted small groups of similar individuals in many parts of the world—London, England; Lisbon, Portugal; Lima, Peru; Warsaw, Poland; Edmonton, Alberta; Laval, Quebec; Boston, Massachusetts; Miami, Florida, and on and on (and so on and so on, as he would have said).

Dabrowski, although he was very wise, seldom offered unsolicited advice, and when he offered his opinion, did it humbly. This too, made him extraordinary for me. Accompanying his insights was a subtle sense of humor. Dr. Dabrowski rarely laughed (Level four individuals just smile loudly) but was often bemused by what he saw around him. Alone but not lonely, broke but not poor, loving but not loved (admired, adored, revered, flattered, but not loved), bent but not broken, down but not out, Dabrowski embraced for me what Hemingway called courage—grace under pressure. Someone asked him once what level he considered himself to be functioning at—the fifth, since he wrote the theory? He missed or lovingly ignored the sarcasm in the tone of the questioner and responded that he, with all his nervous mannerisms, spent most of his time in deeply psychoneurotic states representative of the borderline of the third and fourth level. Unaccustomed to honesty, particularly in an academic setting, the questioner thought he was putting him on. He wasn't. Dabrowski knew that 'the peace that passeth understanding', typical of the fifth-level individual, was not for him.

In conclusion, what was there about this extraordinarily wise and humble man which led me to love and respect him as I did? There was his self-perfection instinct (I admire people who are stern with themselves), his love for his fellow man, his respect for the suffering of psychoneurotics, his capacity to return good for evil and his willingness to stand by his convictions. Add to this his patience for individuals who were themselves growing, his understanding of human 'weakness' (if it arose from developmental dynamisms), and his respect for wo-

men as emotionally superior to men (some of my colleagues might want to argue this last point).

Most of all, I respected his capacity for hard work (life as a labor of love) and his love for his fellow man.

I was amazed by his intuitive perceptions of others, his unerring accuracy in divining the feeling states of suffering individuals, and his ability to touch the heart, the essence of others with his finely developed healing powers. Many 'normal' (false and hypocritical) persons kept their distance from Dabrowski, knowing, I believe, that he could see right through them. The individuals who truly loved him, and who truly benefited from his therapeutic ability for discerning the heart of the matter and the true nature of things, were those who had suffered, because of their sensitivities, unbearably in this world. I have seen such individuals, maltreated for years, bearing the scars of many interactions, put themselves completely in Dr. Dabrowski's hands after a five-minute introductory interview. As one young client of mine once said "That's some guy—*what's* his name again?"

Faltering success—what a big word and a great period in development. Until now there were ambitions, financial needs, desire to possess, desire for power and importance. Need to be higher, unaware of the problems of other people, hurting them or even destroying them. And now, ... forgetting about oneself, helping others, activities grasping at the banal word "sacrifice", compassion, empathy, identification with others and many previously unknown attitudes. But how much we still desire partial success, even small results in spiritual things, in so-called higher matters. Only after the majority of our aims and goals are reduced to ashes, do some remain to light the way toward love without self-satisfaction.

Existential Thoughts and Aphorisms, 1972, p. 18

Dabrowski Tom Nelson, Ph.D.

In the appointment book I read 'K. Dabrowski, V.P. Centre'. This presumably meant that a person holding an advanced degree with the name of Dabrowski should soon appear. I knew little about him other than that he had been recently appointed by Joe Royce as Visiting Professor with the Centre for Advanced Study in Theoretical Psychology. His reason for wanting the appointment was not stated. That was not

particularly unusual but, notwithstanding, a person was bound to wonder what the purpose was.

The entry was predictive, for a few minutes later a short and balding man, abstracted and pensive looking and wearing a dark suit appeared in the outer office. He walked slowly after Al Valle, then our Administrative Assistant. Valle quietly spoke to him and backing away, gestured toward my door. Continuing to look through the partially open door I saw a new person emerge. Dabrowski, or at least who I assumed was Dabrowski, became quite animated. He stepped forward quickly, grasped the hand of the Assistant, shook his hand briefly but very vigorously and thanked him emphatically for his help. Accompanying this transformation, his face became highly mobile and his hand and head movements active and his posture expressive. Now, leading his 'pilot' he rushed toward the door without show of hesitancy. Valle introduced him and I welcomed him into the office. Even though I was attentive and responsive there was little enlightenment to be gained from this interesting person. Dabrowski simply repeated the performance I had already observed. He was a little too emphatic, for my taste, in stating his pleasure at our meeting and perhaps a bit too pleased in being at the University of Alberta. We had had some experience with East Europeans during the years and found most to be formal and somewhat evasive (often for good reasons). This Dabrowski had the same stamp, and I would only get to know him later, if at all. I surmised that the primary purpose of his visit was to assure me that he had arrived and to assure himself that we had an office ready for him. Therefore, after a few moments' conversation, I asked our Administrative Assistant to obtain keys and show him to it. At that time the Department was in nineteen locations, most off-campus, in North Garneau, and he was assigned an office in one of the detached houses several blocks from campus that the University had then (1965) recently purchased. His office was to occupy the south-east bedroom of a house still standing at 11035 - 90 Avenue.

This first encounter left few lasting impressions and for one year I saw little of him. This was to be expected because his appointment was shared equally with Educational Psychology and Psychiatry. However, in his second year, just before Christmas in 1967, I had a visit from a professor in Medicine. This professor, who had the same first and last names as myself, appeared