Dr. K. Dabrowski: An Extraordinary Man

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

p. 22, Existential Thoughts and Aphorisms.
Gryf Publication Ltd., 1972
By Paul Cienin (by Dr. K. Dabrowski)

In 1968, I came upon, 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 those 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 majority rule, but that there were, in his opinion, levels of ‘reality’, each very real to the person existing in that reality. Higher levels could perceive lower levels, but not vice versa, thus, rendering invisible the more sensitive to less sensitive individuals. Secondly, Dabrowski talked about over-excitabilities, which he defined as a “consistent tendency to over-react”. This put a new slant on things – was it possible 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 consternation 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. Formerly ‘invisible’ persons, with their ‘invisible reasons for doing what they do’ would now become visible.

Not always. 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’, even ‘eccentric’. 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 fell away.

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 ones 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.”


Critics of the theory ask, “Is he saying some people are better than others – is that what he means by levels of reality?” 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 abased and abused by those who lack the same qualities, in an effort to destroy higher realities, realities which, in comparison, reveal the abusers’ inhumanity.

"In the world ruled as it is now there must arise
very many psychoneuroses. In this world nervous
persons must be nervous because 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."

p. 33 Existential Thoughts and Aphorisms, 1972.

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. Such individuals 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 – primitive types using and abusing more sensitive individuals, (psychoneurotics, in Dabrowski’s terminology) – each attributing to
the other their own motives for behavior. And thus do primitive persons 'use up' sensitive persons in their milieu - in fact, if they are intelligent and keenly perceptive, the surround themselves with psychoneurotics so that they never have to face themselves 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 made me think of 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 and discovered it was indeed him.

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 critiqued 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, 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.”

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.”


And I found Dr. Dabrowski to be a very humble man. He worked as hard or harder than anyone he ever worked with, always did his share and more. He walked to campus, summer and winter. His attire was modest and seldom drew one’s attention. If it did, it was likely because of a subtle mismatch, which somehow added to his personal dignity. He never ‘hung out’ at the Faculty Club, although he was not opposed to a social 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.

For a number of years, Dr. Dabrowski had a double appointment, part-time with the Department of Psychology, at the University of Alberta, 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, teaching and writing. 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 traveled 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 a period 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 marveled 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 a translation in 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 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 have 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. 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 if it went to war. 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 so on and so on (“und zo on, und zo 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 insight 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, 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 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. Dr. 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 women 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 ‘so-called 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.”

p. 18, Existential Thoughts and Aphorisms.
Gryf Publication Ltd., 1972
By Paul Cienin (by Dr. K. Dabrowski)

**Note:** This paper is a revised edition of one written in 1981 as a tribute to Dr.
Dabrowski. It marked a year since his death and honored his life's work.
MARLENE RANKEL, PH.D., met Dr. Dabrowski in 1968, while studying at the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. She worked with him until his death in 1980, initially as a member of his research team, and then in assisting in the translation of some of his works, in particular "Psychotherapy Through the Theory of Positive Disintegration."

After his death in 1980, Dr. Dabrowski's complex developmental theory of human development framed the approach to her philosophy and her practice. This included the application of his theory to the treatment of sexual abuse victims and offenders. She is currently working at a Young Offender Centre in Edmonton in which, once again, the theory offers new insights regarding the long-term effects of early trauma in the lives of incarcerated children.

Her interests are music, in particular the violin, and poetry, which to her is "a silent scream in the darkness that threatens to overwhelm" as primitive forces continue to set the agenda for world war as opposed to world peace.

She is most interested in the type of persons Dr. Dabrowski has indicated hold the key to such peace, regarding such individuals as guiding lights to those who suffer and those who care.

TITLE:
"Dr. Kazimierz Dabrowski: The Man, His Theory, and His Dream."