

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

with a box that had been wrongly delivered. The box contained baked goods that Dabrowski's wife had prepared and was a gift from Eugenie to our family for Christmas. A few days later Kazimierz himself appeared at my door and invited me to visit his home with my family. We chatted for a few moments and this was the start of a warm and lasting personal relationship with him and his family.

For about six years afterwards we spent occasional evenings together. Discussions gradually turned less upon general matters and became more centred upon ideas that he was developing and wished to discuss with sympathetic colleagues. It was always made clear that he was devoting all his free hours to development of the theory of positive disintegration. Sometimes he apologised for dominating the discussions so much, but he knew that he must work with great speed to expand upon his developmental theory while he had the opportunity to live and work in Canada. He said he was confident that the theory could be usefully applied to clinical treatment areas as well as to pre-, primary, and secondary school education. Also, he felt that if he were able to collaborate with sympathetic colleagues in business and political science, that the principles of the theory would eventually provide a better basis for understanding the origins of good and evil leadership. These evenings were some of the most exhilarating I have ever experienced. There was always a very lively give and take and we were able to arrive at agreement as to what aspects of his work had the most potential for making such interpretations.

Prior to 1975 we never 'dropped in' on one another. Personal interactions were kept structured and somewhat formal. Usually we talked about his theory after the conclusion of social dinner parties held at his house. We never had coffee or lunch together during the day and never attended theatre, concerts, movies, etc. together. I wished it to be this way as well as he. However, his election as President of the Division of Mental Health of the Polish Academy of Science served to bring us closer. As President, Dabrowski had the responsibility for preparing a program. He decided that the program should include foreign speakers and asked me to be one of them. He also offered his hospitality if I should stay in Warsaw for several days afterwards.

His role in the Polish Academy of Science is tremendously interesting because it indicates how great the esteem for Da-

browski was in Poland. His nomination for the Presidency was not expected, much less his election, since he was living outside the country and not in a position either to campaign on his own behalf or to counter the actions of enemies who assiduously opposed his nomination and election. To appreciate how unlikely his election was in Poland as it was then we need only to consider that Dabrowski had not only been imprisoned during the Nazi occupation of Poland, but also imprisoned twice after the Communist government came to power. A man not easily tamed, he was, to use the jargon of Eastern Europe, clearly 'politically unreliable'. Indeed, I was to be privileged to see him confront the party apparatus virtually singlehanded in public debates embracing a number of intellectual and social issues. His actions could well have had disastrous personal consequences for him. During the next days my admiration for this lonely and brave man soared.

Impressions of the meetings held in Warsaw are still vivid. As I now recall, the program covered four days. Speakers were mostly persons from the Polish membership of course, but the program also included the four persons invited by Dabrowski from Portugal, Peru, and Canada, and other invited speakers from within Poland. The procedures followed were somewhat formal. After a brief introduction was concluded, a speaker walked up steps onto a stage and stood behind a lighted lecturn where he or she addressed the audience using a microphone. Invited foreign speakers and most of the speaking membership gave their papers, answered questions put to them by the audience, and then left the stage to sit with friends, students, or in the case of foreign speakers, a translator assigned to them.

The initial major addresses were designed to be semi-official in nature. These were delivered by important persons in government and offered summaries of problems as viewed from theoretical perspective, the perspective, of course, being almost always Marxist. The persons delivering these papers sat as a group at a table placed at the centre of the stage, facing the audience, and to the right of the speaker. This 'panel of experts' not only posed questions for speakers but they also freely discoursed upon the merit of papers and the types of problems dealt with by the speakers.

The tense interaction between Dabrowski and other members of the panel provided the real drama at the meetings. The whole atmosphere became quite heated

when Dabrowski spoke in rebuttal or made a presentation. Remarks directed toward Dabrowski from the floor fell into several categories. There were those which were obscure, at least in translation. Another group constituted obvious attempts to criticize Dabrowski and, in so doing, ingratiate the questioner with the other figures sitting at the table. However, most remarks were requests for further comparisons of his views of mental health with those of other speakers. Dabrowski's performance was magnificent. His remarks repeatedly sent the audience into gales of laughter. His sallies against other panel members were met by stony indifference or anger or embarrassment by his targets.

The meeting was clearly not fun for him. I watched him repeatedly put the back of his right hand to cover his mouth during some of the papers, as if to force himself to be silent. By the time each day was over the knuckles on this hand were a bloody mess. The hand which kept him from speaking out was continually bitten as if in punishment for forcing him to silence. I saw a brave man doing his best against great odds.

In the latter years of the 1970's funds became increasingly tight within the University and a point arrived where the Dean of the Faculty of Arts could not find the funds to continue Dabrowski's appointment as Visiting Professor. Thereafter his Canadian income was sharply curtailed, being restricted to small amounts earned by sessional teaching. He began to talk more frequently of the need to return to Poland where he could resume his medical practice and do whatever writing and publishing was possible there. Also he was heartened by the fact that he had some recent successes in Poland, publishing two books through a Catholic press. The sales provided some capital that might be spent inside Poland, if he returned. He told me that one title, which he translated as "*Hardships of Existence*" had sold its entire edition of 10,000 books within a month, and that another "*Psychology and Autobiography*" had gone through an entire edition of 6,000 books also within a month of its release. Nonetheless it was a sad decision for he had hoped to establish a small clinic in the Edmonton area devoted to postdoctoral education. Such a facility for training students would be difficult indeed to create in Poland. Also he would be leaving his two daughters, Joanna and Anna, behind.

Before leaving he came to me with a play he had written some years before while liv-

ing in Poland. He said that if I could do anything with the play at all he would be very grateful and I should consider it my own property. The title of the play he translated as "No Help To Be Had Anywhere". Dabrowski said it had an existential theme and the play could not be produced in Poland because of its treatment of personality. In general the play dealt with the failure of one 'neurotic' individual to counteract brutal treatment of a child. The neurotic hero offends persons invested with power and suffers greatly in consequence, finally being institutionalised as a psychotic. The plot sounded a bit like the one developed in the movie "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest", except that it employed a chorus. As in the traditional Greek theatre, the chorus was there to interpret the unfolding of tragedy to the audience.

Early in 1979 Dabrowski was assured of an appointment with the Faculte St. Jean and was continued as a consultant to the Provincial Hospital at Ponoka, making it possible for him to take up residence in Canada once again. Our relationship blossomed anew and intensified. However, tragedy was soon to occur. In December of 1979 he suffered a serious coronary and was placed in intensive care for many weeks. I visited him almost daily and as he began to recover he became eager to leave the hospital at once. He was obviously not fit but this did not deter him from seeking my assistance. One day, while I was visiting him in intensive care an intern came in making a routine visit. Dr. Dabrowski pointedly introduced me as a 'Dr.' Nelson. He mentioned that he was consulting with me about his condition and said he believed that Dr. Nelson was of the opinion that he should be back at work as soon as possible and that Dr. Nelson would perhaps be prepared to see that the patient did not exert himself unduly while in convalescence at home!

Eventually, of course, he did recover sufficiently to be released from the hospital and resumed regular work but it was apparent that his energies were now seriously limited. I saw him last in April, 1980, when we agreed that he should not go the conference scheduled in Miami for late November if he could not manage a direct flight. He did not go and the persons at the conference sent him a telegram of congratulations on the success of the symposium and told him of the provisions being made to publish the proceedings. Shortly after I returned to Edmonton and before I had the opportunity to send him my paper, we received word

that he had died.

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The report of the symposium on Dabrowski's work is now published under the title *Proceedings of the III International Conference on the Theory of Positive Disintegration*. The book is a commemorative issue dedicated to Dr. Kazimierz Dabrowski, Ph.D., M.D. (1902-1980). It is about 600 pages in length and includes the papers given at the conference, plus a list of Dabrowski's publications and a summary of his major accomplishments. It can be obtained from Dr. N. Duda, Henderson Mental Health Center, 330 S.W. 27 Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 33312, U.S.A. The cost is \$20.00 (U.S.).

Reflections on a Friend & Guru – Kazimierz Dabrowski

Robert Reece

Mr. Reece is a filmmaker for Filmwest Associates Ltd., the motion picture company that, several years ago, prepared a film on Dr. Dabrowski in action.

Officially, he was "Dr. Dabrowski". I never had the nerve to call him "Kazimierz"; I was worried this would sound too intimate. This perhaps was indicative of Dabrowski's general impression on the world. He was a gentleman of the Old World, formal, yet he was a person who touched deeply those who came near. I was one who crept as close to him as possible. He seemed to be the source of something and if I hung out long enough, perhaps elusive secrets of life would spill over onto me. My persistence didn't bring Enlightenment but it did bring me as close to a disciple-guru relationship as I could have then imagined.

In Africa in 1968, deep in the funk of a romance gone foul, I borrowed from a friend's library, a skinny, grave-looking little volume called *Positive Disintegration*. Although the details are not clear now, I do remember that Dabrowski's message worked in a way that calmed my fear of the agony I was experiencing. The sadness and tears were not initially dispelled but they became more accepted. With the fear gone, the nervous energy in my body began to move! It took expression in poetry, drawing, movie-making, and single engine flying. Tears of sadness became tears of amazement; I have never known such moments of creation.

Four years later, back home in Edmonton, I learned that Dabrowski regularly wintered at the University of Alberta. There was no doubt that I had to meet this great man, the alchemist who could turn misery to joy. Over the next five years a friendship grew between us. I was a filmmaker and I began to assemble a film which would reveal Dabrowski in his clinical practice. There was a general interest in knowing exactly what Dr. Dabrowski did with his patients. It became even mysterious. Clients couldn't recall anything traditionally therapeutic about his sessions. Indeed, the film shows Dabrowski being a friend to those who needed him, a therapist who created a space for his clients to express their most subtle artistic qualities.

I saw him as a master of psychotherapy, but not in the ordinary sense. His job, it seemed, was to return each client back into him/herself. Each found his own "cure" simply by understanding that there is no problem.

Dabrowski called his therapy "auto-psychotherapy". To accept his model of mental growth meant to accept the fact that your neuroses can be signposts on the way to maturity, not detour markers. *Psycho-neurosis Is Not an Illness*, the title of a Dabrowski text, puts his message in a nutshell. And I for one bought the message totally; I became a believer in my own craziness, and an ambassador of Dabrowski and Positive Disintegration.

As I spent more time with the Master and learned to relax with him, I began to see him as a human being, no longer just an author of great academic discourses. I could see that he was also a nervous type, often rubbing his fingers to the point of bleeding, and that he had anxieties about death and the unknown. In other words, he was one of us. I saw Dabrowski as a man who knew as much as a person would know about mental growth, yet I saw him as a man in anguish. Dabrowski could not allow himself the luxury of a holiday from his theories. He was perhaps too knowledgeable for his own good, a man imprisoned by his theory, unable to bear the fear of being totally unidentified.

Looking back, I feel that Dabrowski wanted to be a saviour, although I know he would feverishly deny it. But I know, for me he was a saviour, although he again would deny it. And in my opinion, he himself needed a saviour although the very notion would have made him ill at ease and I'm sure that if I insisted he didn't need a saviour, he would have been honest enough to deny that too.

I only knew Dabrowski as an old man and I could sense his own fear of death and the unknown that would soon be upon him. That feeling moved me closer to him and farther from his ideas.

Today, that's where I stand—fortunate to have been steeped in such a humanistic approach to human individuality but glad to have been able to leave it behind. What's left is a treasured memory of Dabrowski, a man face to face with the ultimate and trembling, and my life reflected therein.

Kazimierz Dabrowski

William Hague, Ph.D.

Perhaps I should begin with the blue mimeographed papers because that's how it began for me. Positive Disintegration was presented to our graduate class in the mid-sixties on page after page of paper, badly typed, badly mimeographed in blue and written in English that more often than not left off the articles from words, that stumbled and recouped itself and somehow flowed on to gradually unravel a theory that was a man's life. The seminars were discussions of the papers given out the previous week and our role was clearly that of a disciple, asking questions of the "master", seeking clarification, sometimes challenging, always probing into what this man who gave out the papers had to say about them. We learned to understand that an expression that sounded like "bicycle idea" meant "basic idea". Some left shaking their heads; those who stayed did in turn learn to think the "basic ideas" of Positive Disintegration as presented on the blue mimeographed paper.

If I have begun to talk about a man in terms of papers and words and mutilated English, it is not to miss the presence of the person but to put figure against ground, to show that, despite all the problems of communication, the man came through, shone through and, in the end it was Kazimierz Dabrowski and his beloved theory that grabbed you with its depth and scope and towering possibilities for explaining what development and psychology and life itself are all about.

Always it was the man Dr. Dabrowski (strange how we all called him *Dr.* Dabrowski) who was the quiet flame that burned (like the candle in the "Java Shoppe Interview") giving warmth and light to a theory that could otherwise have been lost in its own depth and complexity

and power. It was the gentle mannered man with his European graciousness who somehow conveyed greatness without overpowering, who bowed in authentic respect when meeting you and charmed the ladies with his "madame" and "mademoiselle".

He lived what he taught—authenticity. If you asked him how he felt, he would not just give you the usual, platitudinous answer, "Fine". He would reply, typically, "I am feeling somewhat depressed—but hopeful!"

Through the years there were discussions (sometimes at his home with well-remembered Polish suppers) and workshops and numerous invitations to be guest lecturer which he never refused. There were countless meetings of interested people on cold winter nights to form societies for the authentic development of man. There were dreams of counselling offices, schools and institutes that would bring the theory to the people. Too often the great theory foundered on practical things like where would the money come from, or picayune things like what kind of letterhead should we have. Kazimierz Dabrowski would have been a failure as a business executive and still worse as a salesman. He had none of the marketing mentality that often accompanies psychologists who have little to say but a great deal to sell. He had much to give but was not a salesman, and perhaps he attracted like people and so the offices and societies and organizations never really got going.

What would happen though, and it was like a minor miracle every time, is that someone would knock at your office door and say "I've been attending Dr. Dabrowski's seminar; I hear you are interested in the theory; will you work with me?" And some time later an idea, a paper, or even a thesis would come out of it and the man had come through again.

Someone who had had a nervous breakdown would tell you. "When I was 'sick' I thought maybe some good might come out of it all, but I put the thought aside as my own foolish idea. Then I heard what Dr. Dabrowski had to say and I was able to believe in myself and have hope."

It was this enigmatic cross—of great ideas that I know have changed people's lives, and the inability to "market" himself and his ideas—that was, I think the basic tragedy of Dabrowski's life. He had difficulty in being accepted by the powerful yet was loved (almost adored) by his students and his beloved neurotics whom he "greeted" and gave new honor and hope.

I know little of the personal sorrows of the man's life; he was unwilling to talk of them. But I do know of the sensitivity and the pride that was his. The last time I saw Kazimierz Dabrowski was in the intensive care unit of the University Hospital. A young student was reading to him from Dostoevsky as he lay in the bleak public ward hooked up to tubes and monitors. My visit surprised him. He wept at the "shame" of being seen by a colleague in such a condition. Those last few moments together told me much about the man, his pride, his immense sensitivity. They told me something about Positive Disintegration too. We had come far since the blue mimeographed papers fifteen years before.

Kazimierz Dabrowski was a man who focused within himself the broad vision of the scholar and the single-mindedness of a man with a consuming sense of purpose, the abstractness of a theoretician, and the practical concerns of one who had experienced life deeply, the realist's anxiety with what is and the idealist's yearning for what ought to be.

If human lives are "occasions" as Whitehead says, then this life was an occasion of great significance, and if occasions perish but their value persists in the nature of God, then this life's value, rich as it was, persists not just in books written or papers handed out or in theoretical ideas but as a challenge to continue to add value through the lives of those of us who have been fortunate enough to touch on the life that was Kazimierz Dabrowski.
