

Excellence as an Achievement of Contemplation

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Abstract:

In an address to Victoria University published in 1954, Hilda Neatby reasserted the value of contemplation and what she called “the intellectual equivalents” of worship and devotion to an exacting discipline as a means to an appreciation of excellence “in its wholeness.” Neatby would likely be highly critical of what currently passes for the pursuit of excellence in increasingly corporatized universities. Drawing on the work of educators such as Maxine Green, contemporary nature poets (e.g., Tim Lillburn), and the visionary work of Charlie Russell (‘Bear Man of Kamchatka’), this paper re-imagines liberal arts education as a basis for an appreciation of the whole of creation. With an ear to the wild, it asks, how might excellence be reconceptualised to encompass the ecological in ways that serve the public good and how might the public good be expanded to include all beings?

Biography:

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### Excellence as an Achievement of Contemplation

Alison Pick's (2003) evocative collection *Question & Answer* is in part contemplative response to questions pulled from the work of other poets: George Seferis, "How is one to speak with the dead?" (p. 17); Sylvia Plath, "Will it go on?" (p. 19); Carol Ann Duffy, "What colour's the future?" (p. 29). From such questions Pick creates rich, resonant meditations on life and death and all the stuff in between, reminding readers that "Rilke says/love the questions/as though they are poems in some/other language." (p.11)

So too, philosophers of education love the questions and wish to excite their students to inquiry, or, as Adrienne Rich (1979) put it, "to *claim*" an education (p. 231, emphasis in original), rather than be the passive recipients of pre-digested curriculum. Ann Chinnery and others (2007) write of how they use questions in their philosophy of education courses; questions designed to elicit further questions. They invite students to engage with their own authentic questions about teaching and learning, and to interrogate the long tradition of formal education they are joining.

Authentic questions or "open and honest" questions are not as straightforward as they seem. Parker Palmer (n.d.) has adopted the Quaker practice of a clearness committee in his *Courage and Renewal* retreats. In this process, participants gather around a person who is seeking clarity around some issue or question in his/her life that is troubling. In a quiet, purposeful atmosphere, the members of the circle sit with the focus person. Their role is to ask open and honest questions of the focus person to help him or her in a process of discernment. Open and honest questions are based on assumptions and practices that are pretty much foreign to the teachers and other professionals who typically are drawn to and can afford these types of retreats; i.e., it is assumed the focus person has the wisdom, strength, and tools needed to resolve

her situation, and the questions must be ones for which the asker does not know or assume to know the answer. Sitting in a circle such as this, I realize how well I and my colleagues are schooled in asking the ‘leading question’; the one designed to get the student and/or client to see the situation from our well informed and superior perspective. Living with uncertainty, genuine curiosity, and attention to the present moment do not come easily to professionals working in institutional contexts.

Such ways of encounter are not what is expected in an academic presentation or essay. ‘What is your argument?’ we ask our students. ‘Make your case’. The steps of building a persuasive essay, setting out the thesis statement as a resolution to a problem, developing a synoptic literature review, finding and fine-tuning the appropriate methodology, reporting and analysing findings and drawing conclusions are the grist of graduate student supervision, often at the risk of predictable outcomes and mind-numbing boredom for all parties. In this paper, I depart from the well argued position paper, and ask a set of questions that are relevant to the future of liberal arts education. The questions are not new, nor original, but here I put some pressure on them, working to go deeper than the textbook answers, working to enlarge what might be considered as texts, working towards wholeness in appreciation of creation. My responses draw on the eclectic reading and life experience I was afforded by a sabbatical leave. I made it up as I wrote it, not certain where these reflections and ideas would go or how they might resonate (or not) for a wider audience. If there is a central question, then it’s about what might happen if we, educators broadly, kept an ear to the wild. How might such heightened awareness, a more nuanced hearing inform and be informed by a liberal arts education?

**What is worth knowing?**

*Grammar, rhetoric, logic. (trivium)*

*Arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music (quadrivium)* (The Collins Concise Dictionary)

The place where the above roads met was in the medieval notion of an educated person, one whose gender and class privilege allowed him release from the quotidian quest for necessities and the care of others to study, to devote time to abstract thought and to entertain questions about the purpose and meaning of life, perhaps even to satisfy, through disciplined attention, curiosity about some of the ways of the world. Ultimately it was about getting closer to God.

What counts as a liberal arts education in what is widely known as the Western tradition shifts with time and place but always epitomizes an answer to the question about what is worth knowing; always imagines an ideal educated person; always, arguably, misses the mark. It is a mechanism of class formation, of separation. The people who have it are deemed superior to those who not. The common school movement which promised the rudiments of a liberal arts education to all (with certain notable exceptions) has had mixed results and still reproduces social inequities even as it claims fairness and equity. (Axelrod, 1997; Noddings, 2005 )

What is worth knowing? During the summer of 2010, an increasingly desperate British Petroleum appeals to the public for ideas about how to cap a gushing oil well a mile under the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. (Mackey, 2010).

Journalist Alanna Mitchell (2008) is astonished at how little ocean researchers know of other ocean research into massive problems besetting the global ocean system; she reminds us land creatures that the ocean can go on without us, but we are dependent on the ocean—a system seriously in peril from coastal dead zones, ocean acidification, coral reef decline, overfishing and marine debris. And yet, as she points out, even those scientists who understand the critical

importance of the ocean in sustaining life know only their small piece of it. Knowledge of the interlocking systems that sustain life and the reverberating impacts of changes in the ecosystems are only beginning to be charted. Mitchell (2008) recalls the words of Manuel Barange, Director of the Global Ocean Ecosystem Dynamics Program, that “the scale of the solution has to be to the scale of the problem,” words she described as the “scariest” yet. (p.99)

Getting closer to God has less academic legitimacy than ever even as fundamentalisms (religious, cultural, national) shape human relations in ways that inflict havoc and destruction worldwide. (Schick, Jaffe, & Watkinson, 2004) At the other end of the continuum, moral relativism is the darling of corporate capitalism as the huge HSBC posters in airports remind travellers that one person’s traditional is another’s trendy; or, more ominously, one person’s pain is another’s pleasure. It’s more like one person’s pleasure is the source of many people’s pain. Those that are the least responsible for climate change are the most burdened its impact (See, for example, Oxfam Canada, 2010).

### **How do we know what we know?**

*“The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.” (King, 2003, p.2)*

In his widely acclaimed Massey lectures, Thomas King (2003) asks and re-asks what would be possible if we lived by a different story. He begins with a variant of a Native American creation story that is contrasted to the Genesis stories: “the elements in Genesis create a particular universe governed by a series of hierarchies—God, man, animals, plants—that celebrate law, order, and good government, while in our Native story, the universe is governed by a series of co-operations—Charm, the Twins, animals, humans—that celebrate equality and balance.” (pp. 23-24) What if peoples of the Western world had a different story to live by—one with a “flawed deity” who was “understanding and sympathetic” rather than “autocratic and rigid,” one

who sought advice, could accept a little help from time to time--one who let the animals name themselves, or chastised Adam and Eve gently rather than expelling them? (p. 27)

People from the Judeo-Christian tradition have a lot to unpack and the Genesis story is just the beginning. First we are God's chosen people. We take the land we believe is promised to us. Sure, there are rules, but God pledged never to destroy us. Sure there is suffering, but we are always redeemed by it. It's a rite of passage to a better life. Christians took it a step further--not only are we handed dominion of the earth, we are told we can live outside the natural order of things--we can transcend death. Whether we subscribe to Christianity or not, this legacy of triumphalism lives on as a meta-narrative that shapes our identities in ways that make it difficult to decentre and live with humility and respect with those 'not like us'. Being chosen makes us special, superior. Being able to rise from the dead--well, nothing can stop us.

Anti-racist educators are attentive to the ways story telling is shaped by the larger social and national narratives and discourses of an imagined community. They note how common sense ideologies shore up White privilege and a sense of entitlement, making it difficult for those from dominant identifications to see their dominance and to disrupt rather than reinforce the status quo: commonsense assumptions such as "race doesn't matter," or "everyone has equal opportunity," or by individual acts and good intentions one can "secure innocence as well as superiority." (St Denis & Schick, 2003, p. 65) Belief in these ideas keep people from looking at the ways we are complicit in perpetuating unequal relations of power and blames the poor and dispossessed for the problems they experience. When we begin to unpack these beliefs and assumptions and learn how these ideas work to hold power relations in place, then "it helps us to locate the inconsistencies, the cracks we might then use to empower ourselves," (Razack, 1998, p.51); the cracks that let the light in. (Cohen, 1992).

**What matters?**

Why debate the future of liberal arts education—what are we hoping to attain? What can we not bear to let go? What difference will these deliberations make to the homeless, the ill, the poor, the many species facing habitat loss and extinction, teachers meeting their classes on a Monday morning?

Today's children are arguably facing the greatest environmental challenges of humanity's history. The earth is in danger of becoming uninhabitable to humans. At the very moment that we are called upon to meet ecological crises beyond imagination, children in the overdeveloped countries are becoming increasingly estranged from the outdoors. They spend little time playing in fields, meadows, and exploring ponds and brooks. They have less experience growing food or caring for animals. They seldom engage in activities of their own making or in tasks necessary for themselves or their families to survive. In the US and Canada, the family farm may well have been sold to agribusiness to grow bio-fuel crops. Many children in industrialized societies have little opportunity to learn the problem-solving acquired through unsupervised outdoor play and they mindlessly fear the 'out there' (See, for example, Nahban & Trimble, 1994).

Children are targeted as consumers while still in utero. (See, for example, Barbaro & Earp, 2008). How are they to learn the beauty and mystery of the world? How are they to develop a sense of reverence for the earth?

In education systems premised on constructivism, is there any room to “**receive meaning from the world**”? (Shepard cited in Crist, 2008, p. 503) To enter into relationship with other living creatures? To rethink the animate/inanimate dichotomy? To challenge “the dominant humanist-Cartesian tradition of subject-object separation that grants human cognitive sovereignty over everything?” (Crist, 2008, p. 504)



In a now classic piece of nature writing, Henry Beston (1928) called for a different relationship with animals:

We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. Remote from universal nature, and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err,...In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations... pp. 24-25

### **What is the problem?**

Anti-racist educator Sherene Razack (2002) writes about how colonial and racist thinking and practices continue to shape the entitlements and privileges Whites expect and enact. In her analysis of the murder of Pamela George, a young Aboriginal mother from the Sauteaux Nation, Razack traces the myriad ways that George's personhood was diminished during the trials of her murderers. Razack exposes the discourses and practices that encouraged the young White men who killed her to believe themselves entitled to do so and to be supported in that assumption by their parents, the lawyers and judge, and the media, such that the violence and consequences of their actions were minimized and their jeopardized athletic and professional careers were accorded more importance than the loss of Pamela George's life.

White settlement of the Americas was premised on the dispossession and disappearance of Indigenous peoples. The extent and extremity of the on-going violence enacted to displace Aboriginal peoples are routinely diminished and denied. (Lawrence, 2002; Razack 2002; Paul (2006) Education in Canada, whether based in traditions of liberal education, community or place-based initiatives, or industry-inspired skills and competencies, does little to disrupt White privilege. Anti-racist educators find entrenched beliefs in White entitlement, innocence, and

meritocracy to be barriers for those from dominant identifications to begin the work of acknowledging and divesting themselves of the privileges that flow from their assumed superiority. (See Schick, 2000)

Assumed superiority and entitlement are at work in the all-but-forgotten carnage of fish and animals that underwrote the merchantile capitalism of French and British colonial ventures in North America. Tina Loo's (2006) analysis of Canada's shifting laws and practices with regard to wild life management reminds us that the death dealing practices of White settler society included the extinction or near extinction of wild creatures that were hunted for profit or suffered profound habitat loss. Little of that history is taken up in the curricula of formal education, at least in ways that unmask 'what really happened' and the on-going beliefs and attitudes that underpin White entitlement.

"It's all there for you," the bus driver/tour guide announces as we enter Yosemite Valley. All there for us but no longer for the Ahwahnee peoples who were hunted, killed, or driven from the land. Somehow national parks emerge as America's "best idea" (Burns, 2009), but the destruction of the people who were the guardians and caretakers of these territories and their knowledge based on the relationships to the land--the rhythms of work unfolding with each season, the wisdom, stories, the ceremonies--this erasure becomes an unfortunate aside in historiography and referred to as if such callous disregard for life and relationship was a thing of the past. (See DeLuca, K. & Demo, A., 2008)

Canada's national parks belong to us, we are told in TV promos that feature sweeping vistas and a smiling young girl who excitedly accepts this gift. Voice over: "Who is all this for?" "...for me? Wow!" (Parks Canada, 2010)

Definitely not for coyotes. Nova Scotia has recently put a bounty on coyotes that is not called a bounty; rather, a “pelt incentive” (Department of Natural Resources, 2010) Neither bounties nor pelt incentives do much to limit the numbers of coyotes and probably even less to limit their aggression against humans. (Sabean, 1991) While tragic for the victims and their families and puzzling to the scientists who study them, coyotes’ aggression scarcely compares with concerted violent assaults of humans to annihilate them, especially when fear combines with a sense of superiority and entitlement.

Acclaimed naturalist Charlie Russell (2003) is very familiar with the damage caused by misconceived wildlife management policy based on mistaken ideas about animals that generate violent practices against them. His lifelong work to show that it is possible to live in harmony and respect with bears brings to light how the processes of othering, racialization, and producing ‘the other’ as inferior extend beyond human-human relations. Russell spent several years in Kamchatka with the purpose of studying what kind of relationship with bears might be possible in a context where fear of humans had not been internalized. This idea departs radically from the common-sense notion that animals must maintain their natural fear of humans in order not to become dangerous nuisances. Russell was able to build relationships of trust, not only with his adopted bear cubs, but with bears in the wild. One left her cubs in his care while she went foraging. Ultimately that trust was betrayed as Russell could not protect the bears from poachers. The considerable profits to be made from the black market in bear parts undermine any gestures towards preservation, conservation, or peaceful relations.

What is the problem? Fear that human dominance will be unmasked, that the land does not belong to us, but that we belong to the land--no more or less than the worms that tunnel the ground, or the barred owl calling her mate. Fear that those of us with unearned privilege

accorded to Whiteness will have to give it up, learn to share with those we have learned to regard as inferior. Fear that we are not the pinnacle of creation after all; we are less important than plankton floating in the sea.

### **If not here, then where?**

Notwithstanding Obama's questionable decision to fund research on travelling to Mars (Cowen, April 2010), this island earth is pretty much the only place we have. However we proceed with the future of liberal arts education, as Jardine (1998) points out, there is no curriculum without the earth. We need a place to live. Our thinking is grounded in ground.

Thomas King (2003) advises if you want to make a change, tell yourself a different story. With others, I propose one in language that is larger than words--one that encompasses the wild. In "A hundred and fifty psalms at twilight," Anne Simpson (2009) evokes this language and its possibilities. The language we use in our day to day lives is instrumental, efficient, gets the job done:

But ...we may have gradually erased the ways of knowing that are of the body and sundered the connections we have to all that is around us. The very fabric of our thinking has been torn away, frayed from the land, from the wild. (Simpson, 2009, pp. 13-14)

She calls on Thoreau's notion of "tawny grammar" to imagine a wild language: a many-voiced, fluctuating, experimental language that includes beak and claw and like our skin, touches and is touched by the rhythms of the world. (p.18)

What if we lived by a different story? One that is told in the language of the wild, one that leaves room for silence, one that is rooted in love and makes room for contemplative traditions. Zajonc (2006), a Professor of Physics, is convinced of the "crucial relationship between love and knowledge" and notes that "the curricula offered by our institutions of higher education have largely neglected this central, if profoundly difficult task of learning to love,

which is also the task of learning to live in true peace and harmony with others and with nature.” (p.1) He makes a compelling case for the reinstatement of contemplative pedagogies which invite loving attention to all beings. His “epistemology of love” (Zajonc, 2006, p.2) is grounded in the premise that all epistemologies become ethics, and the dominant epistemology of the West is not going to save our planet.

While educators would be hard pressed to associate her with an epistemology of love, historian Hilda Neatby (1954) re-asserted the critical importance of contemplation as a “means to self-realization, to creative activity, to intellectual mastery...” (p.16) The capacity to appreciate excellence “in its wholeness” was, in her view, “the achievement of contemplation,” an “achievement that comes as a rule only through the intellectual equivalents of worship and dedication, the complete and disinterested devotion to an exacting discipline.” (p. 21) Contemplation was thus integrally related to intellectual study and the appreciation of the whole of creation.

What if we lived by a different story? One in which excellence is an achievement of contemplation that acknowledges respect, gentleness, vulnerability, transformation, insight (Zajonc, 2006, pp.2-3); one that strips itself of notions of superiority and human triumphalism and lives, following John Muir, as near the heart of the world as possible.

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