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"We Need a Saviour": An Irreconciling Conversation about Curriculum

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Introduction

Our conversation began in two places of happenstance that, like many conversations and many happenstances, slowly wove together.

The first was in our graduate class on interpretive discourses in curriculum. There, we had been exploring how the industrial model that breaks things down into meaningless and detached bits and pieces had been inherited by schooling in the early 20th century. The interpretive traditions were being discussed as an interruption of this inheritance and as a way of recasting the *ontology* of the topics entrusted to teachers and students in schools. We explored how the interpretive traditions, in multifaceted ways, are founded on the interdependence and interrelatedness of ideas, images, concepts, selves, identities, institutions, schools, and so on. Nothing, in fact, arises as a bit or a piece detached from everything else and simply amassed, *post hoc*, with other bits and pieces, even though many schools and many classroom practices are organized around this ontological falsehood.

In our class, the question arose as to why the traditions we were considering were all quite obviously, as it was put, "Western" and Eurocentric. Our class then took a wonderful turn south (Dussel 1988, 2000) and then eastwards (Smith 2006, Aoki 2004, Eppert & Wang 2008, Wang 2004, Jardine 2008, and several others), and although all this is still, in its own suppressed way, rooted in the West, these roots became more visible. This exploration helped highlight how profound was the ontological interruption of the interpretive disciplines; it helped highlight the depth of the disturbance that that work causes when it leaks into the confines of Canadian schools.

As part of this class, the Buddhist idea of dependent co-arising (Sanskrit: *pratitya-samutpada*) was briefly considered, as well as its consort idea, the belief, ontologically, that things are empty (Sanskrit: *shunya*) of separate self-existence but exist, rather, in open fields of surrounding causes and conditions, the erasure or occlusion of which is one source of deep human suffering.

In class, this in-itself rather abstract idea was illustrated by the example of a wonderful old Calvin and Hobbes cartoon. The two are walking through a forest and Calvin stops and looks down and says something like "Look, a trickle of water running through some dirt!" He then glances over at Hobbes and says, "I think our day is booked!"

We explored this image and how teachers understand something of it, that in the midst of this simple earthly matter, whole realms of experience and prospect, whole fields of exploration and experimentation and sensuous

regard, are suddenly opened up. The link was made, then, back to the interpretive traditions where Hans-Georg Gadamer describes a similar sense of the *ecstatis*—the opening up, the emptying out into all its relations—of words. Hermeneutics, as one of the threads of the interpretive tradition, is based on an ontology which "breaks open the *being* of the object" (Gadamer 1989, p. 362). Every word, every idea, every self, every thing, including this trickle of water running through some dirt, "breaks forth as if from a center and . . . causes the whole . . . to which it belongs to resonate and the whole world that underlies it to appear" (Gadamer 1989, p. 458). That trickle, properly experienced as what it is, does not have:

the character of an object that stands over and against us. We are no longer able to approach this like an object of knowledge, grasping, measuring and controlling. Rather than meeting us in our world, it is much more a world into which we ourselves are drawn. [It] possesses its own worldliness and, thus, the center of its own Being so long as it is not placed into the object-world of producing and marketing. The Being of this thing cannot be accessed by objectively measuring and estimating [what it is for it to *be* such a thing is not accessible if we break it apart]; rather, *the totality of a lived context has entered into and is present in the thing*. And we belong to it as well. Our orientation to it is always something like our orientation to an inheritance that this thing belongs to, be it from a stranger's life or from our own. (Gadamer 1994, p. 191-2, my emphasis)

Of course, this brief reconstruction of that class's work necessarily fails to do full justice to the multifarious array of threads that underwrote it and arose out of it. We offer it as one more example, for teachers and students, of the weird effort at capturing and articulating what *happens* and how memory, reflection, reconstruction, evidence, and demonstration are, like this last term hints, *monstrous* matters with their own lessons (Latin: *monere*, to show, to warn, to teach).

That class intertwined with our conversations over coffee regarding the issue of the deep burden that many teachers and students feel in schools, and what it might be that teachers need to help experience some buoyancy in the midst of these realities in which they and their students live.

What follows is an email exchange in which these two threads wove together. It begins at that moment of Calvin and Hobbes and their trickle of water, and the question of what might be the proper attention to give such matters. Our conversation, initially, detaches itself from the exigencies of curriculum and its practices and then, by the end, winds its way back to such matters.

Kim: I paraphrased them in class, but I thought I'd send you the actual quotes of C.S. Lewis (1952/1977, p. 118; 1942/1980, p. 4) regarding desire:

If I discover within myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

. . . .

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

This is a different perspective that suggests our desires are not misleading

but rather misdirected. We do tend to seek satisfaction in transient things, but that doesn't mean that there is no possibility of true fulfillment.

David: I really do think that this is the direction your work might go, with all the carefulness and thoughtfulness that you obviously have. Go back, now, to that mud-pie. In a world of infinite joy, that mud pie is somehow infinite, is it not? *If* we stop treating it as if it is just some mundane thing. Differently put, can't the world of infinite joy be experienced in a grain of sand, as Blake suggested in *Auguries of Innocence* (written in 1803, first published in 1863)? So the switch is not from one object (mud pie) to another (God), but from treating the mud pie falsely to treating it in the ecstatic truth it portends...the infinite joy is *right there*, but only if we practice and cultivate our attention and learn to see through its apparent ordinariness.

Kim: Thanks for your response and your input. I think, though, that we're working from different and somewhat irreconcilable positions, but I'm not sure I can put my finger on it exactly. I went back and looked at Blake's *Auguries of Innocence* (1803/1863) and it seems to me that he is not saying that we will find eternity in this world regardless of how well we ponder it, but rather that this world speaks to us of Eternity and of another world where infinite joy is possible. There is a connection between creation, the creature, and the Creator. There are ties between this world and the next. It makes me think of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's (& Gordon 2004, p. 217) lines from "Aurora Leigh":

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes.
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware.

So I can agree that we need to look beyond the apparent ordinariness, but we need to look beyond it to the One of whom it speaks.

We do need to cultivate an awareness, but not just of the world around us because we will quickly be confronted by both its beauty and its corruption. We can't escape the fallenness of this world. In the Bible, joy is directly linked to the presence of God (i.e. Psalm 16:11), so we can experience joy in this world because of God's immanence both in creation and in us, but infinite joy will be in heaven where we will experience the fullness of God's presence without the corruption of sin. Perhaps that is the main difference in our perspectives.