



Ear of the Heart

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ABSTRACT

Contemplation plays an important role in developing mindfulness and in preparing us for the work of community in education. Silence, solitude, and the chance to develop one's sense of self and of purpose are often lost in the fast-paced, technologically driven lives we lead at home and at work. This essay provides a rationale for slowing down and paying attention in order to develop the empathy required to face educational challenges collectively.

It's quiet as I write this. The phone is off and I have time to think. What comes to mind is an image of Graydon's 86-year-old hands as they touched the wood and metal items on the table at the school reunion in the Strathclair Community Hall: a penknife won in the school spelling contest; a swing-armed pencil case he shared with his sister; a protractor; a muddied paint set with a mashed brush; slate the size of a piece of foolscap on which he practiced his letters. And here, he said, is a photograph of the sled and the horse that drove your mother, your uncle and me to the schoolhouse every winter morning. They were long, cold, quiet rides, he said.

Simpler times and yet harder. One-room rural schools (arrived at in blizzards; uphill all the way, we joke) meant the physical work of replenishing woodstoves and water, but it also meant a roomful of children from the ages of five to fifteen, musical performances, community spelling bees, pot lucks, dreams of the Chautauqua, and mornings creating drawings for visiting dignitaries. If you didn't quit to work on the farm, you finished your education with flowing, legible script, a reasonable command of numbers, and the ability to read the articles in *The Family Herald and Weekly Star*.

“Most of my grade threes can’t read cursive writing,” one of my graduate students dropped into the conversation recently. “Let alone write it.” I blinked. Somehow that fact sharpened my focus on differences in schools between the last century and this. No more scratching on slates, dipping ink in pots, and relying on a single text: digital media such as email, texting, Googling, social networking, and other technological wizardry now allow us to exchange information across the globe. Schools are populated by children with a rich mix of heritages, who speak more than one language. Sums, letters, times tables, and recitations are no longer enough to fill the school day: we now have complex, multiplying and interwoven curricula, performance measures, and accountability regimes that monitor both teachers’ competence and the educational growth of their charges—students who are increasingly defined, and some say limited, by labels and the weighty cumulative files they drag behind them through the years. It is tempting in climates of such complex activity to romanticize the past, to assume the insular, hard-scrabble life of the last century was a better world.

Yet, as one teacher noted: who has time to spend learning or teaching penmanship? Typing is faster. Texting, even more so.

The year is 2010. More than a jungle out there—it is a circus. Everywhere is a midway: hurry up, buy this, watch that, friend me, tweet me, and drive through. We are forced to ride on the surface of it all—snatching short bits of data as they fly by. Learners are caught up in the melee, and some of them often seem dazzled by the frenzy to do several things at once. Teachers are pulled in many directions simultaneously, hammered by the bell and the expectations of “stakeholders.” School boards, pushed by public and political agendas to do what seems right, and do it quickly, add more weight to their employees’ workloads: teachers are commandeered to enforce a fashionable new policy, for example, or asked to forfeit prep time to complete their administration’s tasks. All of us—from whatever entry point we look at education—are interrupted and interruptible. If we can manage a thought, it is often fragmentary, and to save time, we hit “reply all.” Our lives are marked by beeping, dinging, ringing, movement, and quick, shallow breaths. The White Rabbits of the 21st Century: *No time to say hello, good-bye; I’m late, I’m late, I’m late.*

And, as a result, when I consider what we have gained and lost in a century of progress, my thoughts do not go to increased numeracy levels, to finer-tuned ability groupings, to critical literacy, or to the questionable grip that policymakers, and assessment structures have on contemporary education. My thoughts go to the luxury of having thoughts—to contemplation, empty spaces in a day in which to dream,

take flights of the imagination, and find solitude. We can add knowledge to our lives, but for wisdom, as Taoists remind us, we must learn to take away. Simplicity does not mean less complexity: it means reminding ourselves of what matters.

When I retreat into writing, I often feel like a child reaching the edge of the circus grounds. The cacophony recedes and I fall into the embrace of silence. Solitude affords me an opportunity to enter what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1998) calls the flow state, an optimal state of suspension in which we forget time and external circumstances. Most people, especially artists, find this state of absorbedness to be blissful, pleasurable at the very least. It can be a productive state, not because we produce things, but because we let go, and simply be. We are present: absorbed. As a child, I coloured or drew; made towns out of mud; imagined a life beyond. In school, periods of silence—enforced, mind you, and not always kindly—grounded me, gave me time to work through problems, hear my own voice. From that baseline of sustained silence and relative solitude I drew strength to step into the larger world.

Amid the busy-ness and noise of schools and universities today, I try to breathe deeply and slow down: what are you doing here, I ask myself. What matters? My answers have changed over decades, but I come back to one that endures: our capacity for contemplation is necessary to healthy, creative, and productive educational climates. Without moments of stillness and reflection—moments that Graydon and my mother had in abundance—we run the risk of becoming fragmented beings, diffuse, shredded by data, drawn away from the river of our own wisdom.

From my earliest days as a public school art and English teacher to my circumstances now—teaching literacy education, research, and creative writing in and out of the university—the art of paying attention has been critical to my teaching and my own learning. I have created spaces for silence and mindfulness in my classrooms in a number of minor—yet welcomed—ways: opening a class with journal writing, for example, encouraging doodling during discussions (it is calming, and it improves memory), sending people outside for a ten-minute reconnection with themselves and the natural world, or assigning solitary observation exercises. This cultivation of quiet goes beyond turning off a cell phone. It requires stilling the waters so that we can see the riverbed.

Psychologists, counselors, contemplatives, spiritual leaders, among others, agree that we need quiet and solitude in order to have conversations with ourselves, to change or stretch our minds, and to renew our sense of place and of belonging. Time alone affords us the seasoning of thought: ideas turn over, become nuanced,

cause us to redirect or reconfirm. Buddhist practice suggests that when we cultivate contemplative states and mindfulness we ward off the relentless invasions of the everyday, invasions that detract from our sense of our bodies at rest in the world, of groundedness. St. Benedict, a contemplative, considered silence in and out of community as an opportunity to listen with the ear of the heart. When we attend and listen—whether we want to call it the flow state, meditation, silence, or reflection—our attending opens us up to empathy. We then become more present for others.

Which is where contemplation and community connect, I believe. It is true that technological advances have brought education to people in far-flung locations; online communities can be a lifeline and a necessary resource. Yet when we find our attentions are directed away from face-to-face connections toward primarily online connections, we lose a critical element of being human. The hustle and bustle, the exigencies and the urgencies in the rush of our days, can turn us increasingly toward virtual connections, leaving us with often fragmented, fleeting, and unsatisfactory encounters. To be human is to be social; nothing can replace eye-to-eye conversation, the brush of contact, the synergy of alert and attentive bodies in a room. Human contact is at the heart of learning.

Schools have the potential to be sites for ideal communities. By “ideal” I mean places where individuals, who themselves have learned the value of silence and reflection, come together to create, imagine, push one another’s learning. These communities comprise children and adults who enjoy the thrum of thinking in a space where listening breeds understanding; who experience silence not as uncomfortable or oppressive, but as one of many ways we can be present; and whose capacity to listen to others means they feel no need to make performative or competitive noise.

Communities that nourish empathy and productivity, in my experience, are fueled by possibility, by hope, by a sense of common purpose and the prospect of their own and their members’ renewal. These communities are dynamic: they grow organically and are generative and responsive. They allow each member time and a voice, including a dissenting one. A community is, after all, an organism—there is a sense of possibility in the arc between one body/mind to the other body/mind, in the energy the collective creates.

And yet, as Parker Palmer (2007) has noted, community is an outward and visible sign of an inward and visible grace. Without time for stillness, reflection, and the cultivation of empathic listening, we are more easily tempted to resort to the

most expedient solutions to problems that fly at us individually or collectively. A group of teachers I worked with recently remarked that their rapid pace causes them to rush to judgment. When members of a system have little time to have engaged, sustained conversations, the group said, the too-frequent response is to move into more rules, regulations, and procedures, more control and surveillance. To tamp down creative alternatives, to close off conversation. *I'm late, I'm late.*

In the absence of deep thinking and even deeper conversation, it becomes easy for policymakers or curriculum developers to grab a good idea—a fragment from a research study, for example—and turn it into a strategy, then into a teaching model on its way to becoming testable outcomes. Soon a once-inspired strategy, stripped from its original context, becomes a system-wide requirement, a demand absent of human connection and the joy of learning and teaching.

As L'Arche founder Jean Vanier cautions, community can begin in mystery and end in administration. To cultivate both contemplation and community in education means that we will have to learn to allow for the alchemic mystery and messiness that fosters individual and collective growth. The philosopher Simone Weil (1952) always claimed that fixity is the root of injustice. Creating order, gathering information, and planning for education are necessary strategies, but only when they arise—and are revised—out of the time it takes to listen to each member of a community. To paraphrase Weil again: our minds are enslaved when we accept connections we have not ourselves made. When we make easy, expedient decisions that threaten to undermine teacher confidence, force-march students through fabricated outcomes profiles, and turn good teaching ideas into pre-packaged resources, we risk ripping the wings off the joy of learning and teaching that brought us into the profession in the first place.

Contemplation—slowing time, being mindful, seeking the grace of imagining—develops in each of us a sense of what we stand for and what we can achieve. Heart—its connotations of centre, of source, and of enduringness—is where authentic acts of learning begin. We seldom talk of heart in education, or of spirit, for that matter. But listening with the ear of the heart is an act of the spirit that can reconnect us more forcefully, more enduringly, than high speed or Bluetooth. Our hands hold electronic wonder gadgets, not hundred-year-old wood-trimmed slates, but we do have choices. We can create time anywhere for each of us to turn away from noise, confusion, bells, a blizzard of multi-syllabic edu-speak, from acronyms and to-do lists, toward the gifts that a free hour, a still river, or an empty horizon can bring.

References

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