



Catching my breath: In full flight over the prairies



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 June 2012
Received in revised form
14 March 2013
Accepted 15 March 2013

Keywords:

Vulnerability
Education
Hospitality
Arendt
Ethics
Nativity

ABSTRACT

The author places her tenure submission package into a laundry basket and sets it aloft with helium balloons. Awaiting news, she contemplates curricular encounters and choices of action that have shaped her journey through the academy. She comes to recognize that as educators, we must learn to stop and call ourselves into deep listening and mindful action. What matters is that we attend with hospitality and welcome what and who comes into our presence, as if responding to an unexpected stranger knocking at the door, “who is there?” and open ourselves to the possibilities awaiting us across the threshold.

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*“Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?”*

Oliver, 1992: 94

January 16, 2012

I am afraid. I do not know how this moment will unfold.

September 23, 2011

Yesterday, as I was standing in my favorite coffee shop buying a latté to fortify myself for the long drive up the mountain to deliver my tenure package,¹ I spotted a quote written on the chalkboard hanging on the wall above the espresso machine, “One must risk being a little bit foolish, so as not to be considered wholly a fool,”² and I stopped. I took a breath and laughed.

Was this a sign? I looked at the plain cardboard box into which I had crammed all the supporting documents, copies of articles written, CV, application letter, etc. etc. etc. and I take heart. *This is not the performance of who I desire to be.* I cross the street to the hardware store, and purchase a laundry basket. Then, I scoot next-door to the children’s store, and purchase helium balloons. When I explain to the sales clerk what I am plotting, she laughs, and gives me a discount. And so it is, I deliver my tenure package in a laundry basket with balloons, red, blue, and yellow, announcing my arrival, balloons and breasts bouncing with each step.

An act of resistance. A hopeful reclaiming of who I once thought I was, a celebration of who I hope I might be, beyond the expectations of who I perceive (wrongly perhaps) the academy anticipates. The receptionist receiving my tenure package is not amused. “Put it over there.” She points to a pile of prim boxes piled neatly on a table. “I guess you’ll have to put it on the floor.” She dismisses me, turning her back to the scene. But I am confident in this performative moment. Now, whenever I think about my tenure application and its glacial progress through the system, I smile and consider my laundry basket in full flight over the prairies, traveling distances I have yet to imagine. I have not yet begun to panic.

Maxine Greene (1978) calls us to “wide-awakeness,” warning educators not to sleepwalk through our lives, to be alert to the possibilities that we encounter in our daily lives. Being wide awake to who we are within each moment reminds us that there are choices of action. An ethics of compassion, reciprocity. Attention to injury. Similarly, Karen Meyer (2006) advises us to attend to our everyday living. She tells us that place, time, language, and self/other, matter. Living inquiry invites us to pay attention to how we engage in the world. Write fieldnotes, she tells us. Not the copious notes the anthropologist writes out in the field. But write of those moments that call you to attention, “moments that tug on your sleeve” (Fels, 2012a). Rewrite and rewrite your fieldnote yet again, polish this

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moment like a stone collected on an ocean beach that has a story to tell, if you are willing to listen.

As a curriculum theorist and researcher in arts education, I am curious about relational encounters and learning that emerge through performative engagement—performance as a living encounter that calls us into presence, alerting us to the responsibilities of relational reciprocity of intimacy, vulnerability, and care.³ With each encounter that we engage in, in our lives, in our teaching, in our work as artists, choices of action are required; we are not always wise in our choosing, or wide-awake. Our challenge is to stop and call ourselves into mindful action, to listen deeply⁴ to what is within our hearts. What matters is that we attend with hospitality and welcome what and who comes into our presence, as if responding to an unexpected stranger knocking at the door, “who is there?” and be willing to open ourselves to the possibilities awaiting us across the threshold. What we do not yet know, is that the stranger who comes into our presence, is the child we left behind.

I imagine this writing, performative,⁵ and narrative,⁶ a layered account,⁷ to give voice, weight, and illumination to moments, each a polished stone,⁸ touching on lived experiences of engagement in school, from childhood to adulthood, moments of vulnerability that stop me still. Such moments are what Appelbaum (1995) calls stops: *moments of risk, moments of opportunity*, in which I recognize the danger of losing myself, my voice, my attention to what matters. These moments track⁹ the path I lay down in walking,¹⁰ from the child seeking to retrieve her red mittens, under the scrutiny of others, my confrontation with the word count of my first academic paper, a moment of resistance, to my failure last year to recognize presence during my lecture on Arendt’s natality and Greene’s “wide-awakeness.” Sleepwalking. *Mea culpa*.

In the writing of this piece, I had not anticipated my telling of these particular moments, haphazardly located as they are through the timeline of my academic career. These moments are stories with dates, typed on a page, yet embodied, living under my skin, calling me to attention. These moments startle me, scattered through time and place, in which I am child, graduate student, teaching assistant, assistant professor. I had not realized as this text unfolded, that they had mattered, burrowed deep within my body. Yet, as they surface now, I realize that in terms of my educational journey, these are the moments that caused me to falter, to mistrust, to seek refuge under the camouflage of what is known, recognizable, familiar. *Moments that silenced, moments to deny*. Until the moment when I come face to face with natality, an unexpected stranger in my classroom, and recognize the moment as mine to embrace.

In *persuasions of the wild: writing the moment, a phenomenology*, Jana Milloy (2007) calls upon us to dwell within the moment; she invites us to listen to the gaps, the silences, the unspoken, the unsaid, the unsayable¹¹ written within those moments that trouble us. Such moments of dis-ease may not be easily translated; each moment is fleeting, elusive. And yet I have come to realize that within each moment dwells a lifetime of possibility, renewal, hospitality, resistance, invitation, restoration, reflection, and welcome. Each moment that stops us calls us to attention, into presence, and while we may be delinquent, ignorant of those moments that elude us, each moment arises with consequence. Each moment, as Milloy reminds us, unfolds, one into the next, and although oft-times beyond our grasp, such moments are embodied within us, dwelling as an unsuspected stranger within our household of lived experience.

*Each moment a child of duration.*¹²

Such moments may haunt us, or taunt us, skulking in shadows. Such moments may be beacons of light that pull us out of sleep in

the hours before dawn. What matters is that we attend to what or who calls us into presence, so that we might be wide-awake to what gifts may be offered. The telling then of these moments, time-skipping across the page, like a stone a child throws, disturbing the flat calm of a pond, calls me awake. This writing is a coming home to a way of being in the academy where I recognize myself anew.¹³

November 2011

I tell my friends that waiting for news of tenure and promotion is like living with a low-grade fever. After a while, it becomes normal, this anxiousness of spirit that flows unmarked through veins and arteries. You don’t realize its presence until someone asks how you are and you find yourself launching into a ten minute monologue about how your tenure package is floating over the Canadian Rockies or is caught in a thunderstorm over the prairies, or maybe it’s in Montreal, or, hey, if you look outside the window, right now, you’ll see my laundry basket floating by, balloons holding it aloft. And they look at you askance, as if you’ve taken flight from your senses, and you realize that you are in trouble. “I can’t feel a thing,” I tell them. “I’ve lost all sense of being. Here, check my pulse.” I’ve placed a lot of hope in the helium, to maintain altitude. My thesis package has taken flight, but in my heart, I know it is sitting in a room, surrounded by other thesis packages, balloons drooping. How will I be received?

December 1962

I am six years old. My friend and I have stayed after school to color in our workbooks. The big black clock on the wall shows it is three o’clock. The grade ones have left for the day, and now only the grade twos are waiting for the three-thirty bell, their heads bent low over scribblers, practicing their cursive writing.

“Could I borrow your blue crayon?” my friend whispers.

“Here it is,” I respond happily.

“Please be quiet!”

The teacher looks at me, and, in unison, the grade twos follow suit. Under their scrutiny, I am embarrassed, ashamed. I leave the room, and in the cloakroom, remove my snowsuit from a bronze hook. I pull on my snowpants, my jacket, my hat, my boots, then realize that my red mittens are still on the hot air radiator in the classroom, drying. I tiptoe in, my heart beating like the wings of a captured bird, I can barely breathe. I am determined to pass through the room like a ghost, invisible, like air aimlessly turning the construction paper mobiles that hang from the ceiling, but my winter pants betray my presence. No matter how lightly I tread,¹⁴ the sound reverberates throughout the room.

Swish swish swish

The teacher stops in mid-sentence, and all eyes in the classroom turn in my direction. I forget to breathe.

Shame slips under my skin, and journeys with me as I lay down a path in writing¹⁵ swish swish swish out of the classroom and into my future. This child tugs at my sleeve. What, are you here, still, haunting me?

October 1994

I am on academic alert. They are watching me, I feel their judging eyes as I pass by the department office, secretaries momentarily paused in their work, hands stilled above keyboard. I have been

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