**The World is Too Much: Fostering Awareness of self in New Teachers through Mindful Practice**

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**"THE WORLD IS TOO MUCH WITH US; LATE AND SOON"**

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon,
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. --Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.*

~ William Wordsworth

*The world is too much with us; late and soon,*

Teacher education, the preparation of teachers for public school classrooms, struggles with its identity and mission of ‘educating’ our nation’s youth. The struggle emerges out of multiple influences that would name our identity. The state requires we prepare teachers who can teach content standards that will be measured. The community desires a school that reflects its values. The nation cries that youth must be prepared for work and add to the GNP of our economy. Competing aims hold education in tension, sometimes inclining toward the loudest constituent, or the closest community, or the funding source. These constituents play off of each other to influence teachers and schools at the policy level as well as the local parent/teacher associations.

In the competing cacophony of demands, expectations and requirements, at least in our current early 21st Century era of economic re- (de-)pression and growing income disparity, schools are situated at the forefront of the damage wrought by dwindling resources and increasing demands for accountability. Each constituent, spiraling in its own separate demands and assumptions to harness education in a particular direction, assumes its own purpose of education. Which competing demand will influence a school, with their teachers and students?

“The world is too much with us, late and soon,” wrote Wordsworth, pointing to a sense of fatalism in the completion and busy-ness of the world both past and future. In fact, two hundred years after he wrote this sonnet, his images send a shiver of recognition as we try to keep pace with the exponential weight technology demands from us. We in schools are bombarded with ‘noise’ of these demands on so many levels, demands that force us to close off and to minimize hassles. The world, indeed, is too much with us, cluttering our minds and obfuscating our thinking about teaching and learning. We may have 21st Century technology, but our thinking and ways of being are rooted in past centuries; we have new tools but we generate enduring, ancient problems that divide rather than unite us.

*Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;*

In teacher preparation, coursework and field experiences under the requirements of state and national standards for Teacher Education create their own whirlwind of demands and requirements for new teachers to integrate into their habits of mind. For novice teachers, the list of requirements as they develop skills in writing lesson plans, with all the interconnected components, can become the aim rather than the means of teaching so students learn. The work of the external (planning, assessment, motivation/discipline, etc) trumps the internal work necessary for applying the external skills for the greater purpose of human flourishing. But the technocratic teacher is not sufficient for the restoration we must engage in as keepers of our planet.

*Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!*

Our curricula can seem separate from our students’ immediate lives and circumstances, where teachers ask students to learn to identify concepts and facts about states but many times limit the lesson to just those concepts and facts with no attention paid to the state of consciousness. (Ironic, I think, considering most teacher preparation programs teach educational psychology about how people learn). By valuing learning that is external to us, we may be able to catalog or argue without ever seeing ourselves “in nature that is ours.” When we feel separate from nature, I take this to mean our natural world, of course, but also our human nature, our sense of a self, connected to others and to all life. Such disconnection is taught through a pedagogy and curriculum that instills in us a disregard or worse, disrespect, for our emotions, intuition and sensitivity to privilege a “knowledge of most worth” that has been determined by others, reduced into a textbook, and then served for memorization. Emphasis is on cognition, passing the test, with little acknowledgement of the moral or ethical dimensions within us. “Upon the ethical side, the tragic weakness of the present school is that it endeavors to prepare future members of the social order in a medium in which the conditions of the social spirit are eminently wanting.” (Dewey, p. 15. 2008/1902.)

Democracy needs engaged citizen-activists who critically think about how we can live in ways that sustain us in the now, and sustains us in the future, we in education have a crucial role to play in teaching students to become aware of their environment, of how they impact others, and to live in ways that have value and meaning, at the same time teaching students the standard curriculum in ways that will create value and meaning.

*So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn*

I want to share ideas from my teaching of pre-service candidates within a traditional institution and program and how I introduce awareness by gently inviting my class to engage in contemplative practice as a way of preparing ourselves for our work together that day. I call what we do a form of mindful practice. By the end of the term, students come into class and become quiet, in preparation for opening their minds and hearts to what we will share that day. The shift in behavior occurs gradually, hardly noticeable the first two weeks as students walk into class and fill it with their energy and chatter. However, sometime around the fourth or fifth week in the term, the energy of activity and talk lessens and another form of energy begins to take its place. This other form of energy is visible in the eye contact with one another, smiles of greeting, and a calmer demeanor. Before the hour starts, students are in anticipation of the good morning words I usually have for them before we allow mindful practice to help connect with our breathing and our feelings, to allow all our busy thoughts to slide to one side, making way for an open mind. When students and I then begin to delve into the ideas and ethical visions of teaching, it is when I see the hope for our profession and have faith in our future. Teacher candidates have an idealism and capacity for hope that fills me with optimism for the courage they have to commit themselves to nurturing student growth and development. With this sense of renewed commitment each time I teach candidates, the obligation sits upon me to teach in ways that will not only foster their teacher thinking and understanding that will sustain their capacity for hope.

Yet hope while necessary is not sufficient for the ambitious teaching, the rigor of thinking and conscientious work it will take to teach memorably, deeply, and with an aim of human fulfillment. Teachers are one group of members in a community that can foster new ways of thinking about how we relate to one another and our world through humanistic pedagogy that has as its aims not only the construction of knowledge and understanding of the world and our place within it, but the aim of human fulfillment as well.

This concept of human fulfillment emerges, in part, from my research into the work of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944), the Japanese educator and philosopher. Central to his ethical vision is the idea of *value*, that is that we as human beings must be free to create the values of “beauty, gain, good.” Human fulfillment is accomplished as we seek to create these values of beauty, good and gain, in turn positively impacting others through our own creation, thereby nourishing a wider community in the name of value creation. We seek beauty as an individual, but when we share in these values the gain is enhanced and we move towards good for all life. Such a philosophy supports the forging of a society (and world) that can contribute to a culture that is sustainable rather then the world as it is today, limiting our thoughts and actions, reducing us to political/economic/social transactions that are anything but humanistic. (Hansen, 2007, pp 65-67) Mindful practice is part of my pedagogy, the aim of which is to support candidates’ learning to teach memorably, deeply and with the aim towards human fulfillment.

What does mindful practice look like in my classroom? Each meeting we sit together in silence as the prelude to beginning our work together. Usually one minute is the tolerable level before someone begins to get uncomfortable. One minute feels like ten when you are unused to listening to your breathing, allowing your mind to clear, and to relax yourself. That moment of silence tunes us into our breathing and sensing one another’s presence—and it has added a sense of belonging to our group. I’ll talk more about that later.

When I first started using mindful practice in my classroom, I had to think carefully how to frame this experience, and what to name it. The institution I teach in is a small regional university. In the department I belong to a deep conservatism about teacher preparation pervades the culture; therefore I am chary in my approach with candidates. Gradually candidates level of tolerance rise over the quarter, and I add a minute or more each week until the end of the term. Candidates will sometimes ask for longer silence, and they will ask if we can do this next class.

The course where I use mindful practice is on the content of Social Foundations of Education, where candidates read philosophers who address the purposes of education. I draw from philosophers from the US, but also Japan, India, Africa and China. Philosophers like Tsunesaburo Makiguchi demonstrate to us a life of courage and depth in the face of injustice, inspiring us to consider his vision of happiness and human fulfillment as a possibility, or offer us a glimpse of what-could-be in society. If candidates take one thing from Makiguchi it is that the welfare of the world is connected to our well-being, our fulfillment as individuals. Other philosophers I select for this course, Rabindranth Tagore, Albert Schweitzer, Jane Addams among them, all argue for freedom of the individual and his/her connection to their environment, an environment they are taught to love and care for. Emphasis on purposes of education that honor human agency through engagement with the natural world, to read philosophers who argue the health of the world is linked to the health of all, including humans, begins to alter frameworks of the candidates in ways that provide examples that contrast with what their own experiences.

Using mindful practice at the start of each class allows me to introduce “silent” discussions that extend mindful practice in another mode. I began using protocols from National School Reform Faculty (<http://www.nsrfharmony.org/>) to assure that all candidates had opportunities to share their thinking. Because the protocols assure everyone has a chance to speak/share, I named them equitable protocols. One class it occurred to me that we could modify an equitable protocol and use it in silent work together.

One protocol is called a Chalk Talk, a silent discussion around a quotation or piece of text. (<http://www.nsrfharmony.org/protocol/doc/chalk_talk.pdf>). Chart paper is hung around the room, each with a quotation or question or statement from that day’s reading. And then a question is asked, broad enough to be open-ended and invite responses. Candidates count off into groups so each chart paper has the same number of candidates in front of it. Silently, each person reads the text and thinks before writing a response on the paper. Others read and add their own response, and also may write responses to other’s ideas. The chart paper begins to reflect the thoughts of that group. A chime alerts the groups to move to the next chart and repeat the process, reading the responses of others before beginning. This goes on until all groups return to their original chart paper and read all the remarks from all their classmates. This could take up to an hour, and the intensity is palpable and is seen by the avid interest taken to read all the writing on each chart paper.

A silent chalk talk is made deeper, and candidates can sustain the silence longer, I think, when they have a few weeks of mindful practice experience. Getting to hear silence, becoming familiar with your breath, sensing the energy of others requires expansion of one’s capacity to accept the power of silence, so we practice and develop the habit, becoming familiar with sitting in silence with ourselves, so we can open our minds and learn together. Mindful practice becomes a ritual to learning, and candidates have told me they think the class has helped them see the world differently.

By mid term I can add another dimension, which happens after mindful practice, and when we are in a text rendering or analysis of a piece of text. I identify a particularly challenging quotation from the assigned reading. I assign cooperative groups whose task it is to work in silence as they write together to deconstruct the text, and try to find meaning. Writing on the same sheet of paper, candidates will often sit in silence together pondering the quotation. Then, writing in silence, they begin to write their analysis, building on what others write, until they are satisfied. The depth of analyses done in this approach is impressive, and candidates remark how silence helped them “see” into the quotation’s meaning.

From candidates’ responses, mindful practice is appreciated and all see its value as part of our class culture. One candidate wrote to me that he had “for the first time in college become aware of his mind, and could hear himself think.” Another shared that without mindful practice “the philosophers would not have meant as much because I could not have heard what they offered me, but with mindful practice I feel I can understand.” And another candidate shared that “this class was not able to go as deeply into these ideas at the beginning of the class. I wonder if it is because we do mindful practice and that helps us become smarter.” And during a class discussion towards the end of one quarter, candidates brought up mindful practice as a valuable part of the class that “helped us come to feel like we belonged, like we were a community.” Such comments reinforce my use of mindful practice in my classroom as a way to develop a richer sense of self in relation to others, and to connect to the ideals of the philosophers we read. In our fragmentation in life, to gain a sense of community in a classroom is a value, one that fosters open-heartedness to others. Through mindful practice I try to guide candidates to deeper awareness and a sense of connection of self with others. This cannot be forced or demanded. As Dewey tells us “guidance is not external imposition. It is freeing of the life-long process for its most adequate fulfillment.” (Dewey, p 17)

Candidates who have experienced a sense of community recognize that they – and the young people they will teach – do develop in isolation from one another or their environment. Each generation must discover its interconnectedness, its need for others and for our Earth. Makiguchi argued that we must fall in love with our earth and with all life. Creating value meant that we nurtured our own happiness, and by being happy, we impact others and create goodness and value. Those of us committed to justice and peace seek to prepare teachers for our public schools in order to create a sustainable and humanistic society, will need to adapt our teaching our young. Our aim is to teach young so they “possess the wisdom to perceive the interconnectedness of all life and living; the courage not to fear or deny difference…and the Compassion to maintain an imaginative empathy that reaches beyond one’s own immediate surroundings…” (Strand, 2006, p. 5) The steps we take may seem humble, as in mindful practice, but as Makiguchi tells us, it is in the creation of value and human fulfillment that can touch one life. That one life can touch many. In the case of a teacher whose aim is human fulfillment, the youth s/he teaches can lead the way towards a future of hope.

This is what was bequeathed us:
This earth the beloved left
And, leaving,
Left to us.

No other world
But this one:
Willows and the river
And the factory
With its black smokestacks.

No other shore, only this bank
On which the living gather.

No meaning but what we find here.
No purpose but what we make.

That, and the beloved's clear instructions:
Turn me into song; sing me awake.

- Gregory Orr

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