

Commercialism, Fear, and a “Tragic Sense of Life”

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Barbara Stengel provides intentional paradox and playful circularity in considering the roles philosophers of education might play in furthering a form of optimism represented in the phrase “Therefore, we can...” The “we” in the phrase is also important, for it changes and morphs throughout the address. “We” are philosophers. “We” are advocates and teachers. “We” are sentient, emotive beings whose affect is often either marginalized by Reason or so overly vaunted that it collapses under the hyper-psychologized, solipsistic redundancy of “to me, personally, I feel” narratives. “We” are challenged to consider enabling as a legitimate element in an expansive, positively “frayed” outlook within and beyond philosophy of education. I agree with Stengel, via Zygmunt Bauman, when she argues that “liquid life” leads to “liquid fear,” although I initially thought “liquid fear” referred to vodka in a squeeze bottle.

My response proceeds in three parts: two-thirds fully endorse points four and five of Stengel’s nine-point “practical argument,” those dealing with consumerism and fear. The last third is an effort to supportively trouble points one through three and six through nine, collectively, by asking how we enable the meliorist “We can” idea in social contexts that appear fatalistically doomed by the very realities Stengel identifies in her address (quests for certainty, fear of failure, and Race to the Top strategies, for instance). I build on Stengel’s important ideas and enlist Miguel de Unamuno’s *Tragic Sense of Life* and *Love and Pedagogy* to help extend the conversation in part three.¹

For the first two points, then, note that leading contemporary theorists like Ken Saltman, Kristen Buras, and Philosophy of Education Society’s own Trevor Norris continue the intellectual tradition of critiquing commercialism that began at least as far back as Raymond Callahan.² These scholars take up Stengel’s concerns and question the meaning of learning in spaces where a corporate logo is clearly identified and understood and where the Greek *logos* is arguably hard to find, or bastardized into “what works” proceduralism and pedantry. Consumer culture breeds more consumption — not only of material goods over intellectual ones, but also of “data” and “information” to police the spaces in which students, teachers, and administrators are re-affirmed in their consumer roles. The fable of free markets breeds competition in the same way it breeds fear, as Stengel so aptly indicates. It is mythological and also very real.

I was reminded, reading and re-reading Stengel’s address, of one of my favorite quotes from Maxine Greene. In *The Dialectic of Freedom*, Greene laments that most of society is interested in “*having* more rather than *being* more.”³ We value amassing things over struggling to understand whether ethical or ecological issues are at play in amassing things. Stengel recasts and inverts this point in fearful terms when she writes that students “do not fear *being* stupid, but *looking* stupid.” Here, we are

acting on the valued amassing of things — enacting what amassing requires: looking or appearing smart only because we do not care whether we actually are or not. Here, too, “smart” is understandable only to the degree that it is made apparent, that is, performed or enacted in particular ways. Students are increasingly brilliant at demonstrating the appearance of smart or what is taken to be success in schools, largely because schools perversely expect it of them. Schools (like society) provide the outline or rubric and students figure out how to expend the least amount of energy to amass the most points. The “language of crisis” implied by Stengel’s articulation of “calamity’s media coverage” means that schools are “failing” because we have made schools thinkable as such. Might the “failing school” be a myth manufactured to foment fear and thus provide justification for increased scientific intervention and control? Is the idea of a “failing school” a destabilizing element in the larger push toward privatization and a colonizing consumerism?

We appear to be caught in a continuing cycle of consumption and fear. These are not the only two aspects concerning us, but they are uniquely situated to “enable” a different kind of understanding than the received “truth” most people call “the real world.” Schools feature prominently here because schools are taken as the means to a variety of pecuniary ends. Schools prepare students for “the knowledge economy,” skilled jobs, college and university (online, for-profit, and others), and always, it seems, a distant future of “givens” whereby means, goals, actions, and achievements are elements in an *a priori* imminence. “Be not afraid” becomes a scare-inducing assertion: I wasn’t afraid until I was told not to be afraid. Leaning forward in inquiry risks facing Pi’s Bengal tiger. Leaning forward in this sense is productive fear: instinct *and* emotion making obvious how fully alive we can be. “We can” or “can we?”

It is at this point where I turn to the third section of this response and trouble the “We can ...” enabling narrative Stengel offers us. In doing so, my point is to tease out some of the tensions that seem inherent in such a call, perhaps especially a call to those of us in philosophy of education. On Stengel’s view, we have a responsibility to be engaged with practitioners and policy-makers. As much as we are required to know Plato, Pestalozzi, and Merleau-Ponty, we also have a moral and ethical obligation to do more than challenge our students. Hers is a call for agency, but one of a particular sort. Here is where Miguel de Unamuno’s *Tragic Sense of Life* and *Love and Pedagogy* might be helpful.

In both “novels,” Unamuno laments scientism and recasts paradox as central to the project of understanding who we are as individuals in social and communal relation with others. He denigrates pedantry and rationalism, though not from a standpoint whereby his assertions exist alone or above. Indeed, like Stengel, Unamuno argues against himself and positions affect and passions concomitantly with reason. His point is to elevate emotion so that logic is not the singular, primary indicator of “progress.” Unamuno writes:

[People are] said to be reasoning animals. I do not know why [they have] not been defined as an affective or feeling animal. Perhaps that which differentiates [people] from other animals is feeling rather than reason. More often I have seen a cat reason than laugh or weep. Perhaps it weeps or laughs inwardly — but then perhaps, also inwardly, the crab resolves equations of the second degree.⁴

At the 1968 meeting of Philosophy of Education Society, Philip Phenix delivered a general session on Unamuno in which he argued that the central problem in Unamuno’s work was his grappling with immortality.⁵ The grappling, mirroring Phenix’s own work on reverence, was between emotion and logic: “... love — concrete, personal affection — triumphs over cold abstraction, though not without tragedy.”⁶ It is this tension between affect and abstraction for which Stengel is seeking unstable stability. Such wording is vital in understanding Stengel’s project because, like Unamuno, she is not only troubling the “givens” of our lives, but challenging the troubling. Like Unamuno, Stengel uses “irresolvable contradictions” to clarify the importance of human *being*. Her project, like Unamuno’s, is what Jack Conrad Willers identified as fusing “the rational and affective forces of human endeavor and not to give in to their antithesis.”⁷

Though both Unamuno and Stengel are lamenting, neither ceases to think or act. Unamuno lost his rectorship for ruthlessly criticizing Spain’s fascist authorities. He continually challenged his students and readers to reconsider the quixotic as central, valid, and necessary for improving the human condition — but only if they also questioned centrality, validity, and necessity. Stengel similarly engages her students and readers, both within philosophy and practical schooling, to challenge the “taken for granted” and the tragic “ordinariness” of daily life in schools. Stengel’s is not a prescriptive tonic. Her claim is *not* “about what we *should* do,” but what we *can* do. She wants us to consider and reconsider our positions in a different imaginary. “We,” again, are not to follow her teaching, but engage with its productive messiness. In a most limited sense, “we” can achieve the goal of engagement at the present Philosophy of Education conference. I am less convinced that the plural pronoun holds up outside our meeting space in the Benson Hotel.

The problem I see is likely tainted by an increasing anti-meliorist cynicism developed during my twenty years at a corporate university in Georgia where conservative legislators recently determined that funding for colleges and universities will soon be based on graduate rates: more money if students graduate in four years, less money if they take longer. This legislative logic, a form of neo-Taylorism, represents an entrenchment of reductionist thinking that makes me balk at the potential of the agentic vision Stengel’s “we can” suggests. It is in Georgia, but not only Georgia, where the deliciously messy form of inquiry Stengel advocates is unthinkable. Can Arne Duncan understand the importance of Stengel’s ideas? What does it mean when editors at *The New York Times* consistently undermine teacher unions and champion standardized testing? I can turn to Unamuno and Stengel for tragic sympathy, but there is no affective comfort in realizing that the left has apparently, well, left. Stengel wants us to embrace a “Therefore, we can ...” view. I applaud it, sincerely, but wonder if we realistically have the potency or primacy to make meaningful, lasting changes that benefit students and teachers in the substantive ways she persuasively articulates. Mine is not a call for the very “how to” roadmap Stengel correctly denies can exist — particularly in generalized, transferable ways. We are left to devise these for ourselves in context with others. And this is important work. So, with Stengel, I will rethink and reconsider the possibilities

and the varied and as-yet-unknown prospects of a “We can ...” commitment. I just hope it isn’t tragically lonely.

1. Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1913/2006); and Miguel de Unamuno, *Love and Pedagogy* (New York: Peter Lang, 1902/1996).

2. See Kenneth J. Saltman, *The Failure of Corporate School Reform* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2012); Kristen Buras, *Charter Schools, Race, and Urban Space: Where the Market Meets Grassroots Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Trevor Norris, *Consuming Schools: Commercialism and the End of Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011). See, also, Raymond Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); and Alex Molnar, *Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America’s Schools* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001).

3. Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 7.

4. Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, 3.

5. Philip H. Phenix, “Unamuno on Love and Pedagogy,” in *Philosophy of Education 1968*, ed. George L. Newsome (Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), 47–59.

6. *Ibid.*, 58.

7. Jack Conrad Willers, “Response to Philip H. Phenix,” in *Philosophy of Education 1968*, ed. Newsome, 68.