

Empty Chair, Empty Boat

Claudia Eppert
University of Alberta

In *The Truth About Stories*, indigenous writer Thomas King states, “want a different ethic, tell a different story.”¹ In her essay, Claudia Ruitenberg conveys her commitment to a different ethic; a Derridean-informed ethic of hospitality that assumes the decentering of the host subject. She references the story Jacques Derrida tells of the Jewish custom “of leaving an empty chair at the Seder table” in order to illustrate how Derrida’s distinctive ethics embeds the relationship between host and guest not in conventional notions of reciprocity or exchange but in the host’s generous spirit of unconditional giving. Rather than “program” the guest into a particular agenda of time, content, or character, the host opens him or herself to the potential of an unfamiliar arrival. The host’s decentering, rather than self-centering, orientation calls for reflexivity by educators of our capacities to leave space for who or what might appear at our doors or in our curricula. The questions Ruitenberg asks are vital and, in embrace of her proposal, we might delve more into the recesses of current educational spaces and psyches. In what follows, I offer three brief queries for further exploration, and also introduce Chuang Tzu’s Taoist story of “The Empty Boat.”

First, Ruitenberg via Derrida describes hospitality to entail “the deconstruction of the at-home.” I concur that hospitality importantly translates into pedagogical invitations for students to question underpinnings of curriculum and critically examine the construction of our *socius* and *demos*. It also seems vital for teachers to deconstruct their own at-homeness in schools, curriculum, and their positions, and mindfully exercise a decentering humility rather than seek domination or control. Yet, these days, my worry is not that teachers are too at-home, but that many are increasingly less at-home in educational settings, which brings me then to contemplate some value in at-homeness. Ruitenberg rightly observes that “formal education is steeped in a paradigm of exchange.” Teachers in my courses repeatedly recount their experiences of restriction, marginalization, and helplessness. High attrition rates further attest to alienation among new teachers who enter a “sink or swim” schooled environment, stressed with having to teach subjects outside their expertise, burdened with increasingly larger class sizes, and so on. And while, like Ruitenberg, I give considerable educational import to being discomforted, this disease, and the reminder of etymological connections between hospitality and hospital as a site of healing, introduces for me questions regarding the relevance of well being and balance. I wonder where not only students but also teachers might find refuge and thrive in an inhospitable and impoverished globalized terrain. How fully can I host a new arrival if I am not host, and socio-political conditions are such that I am not well?

Second, I continually struggle with the real measure of my willingness and capacities to let one who arrives at my door take place if it entails accepting

encounters with content or character that contribute to an exploitative world. My hospitality becomes anxious when faced not with a soft and fragile spirit or even necessarily an angry and volatile young learner, but rather an aggressive and powerful or power-seeking other, a corporation or curriculum that seeks my servitude and threatens my integrity and those of others and environment solely for its own gain, for example. In such instances, I find myself likely trying to diminish anger and practice tolerance, or rigorous patience, and fortitude and courage. I would like to think that in my more generous-hearted moments, I can even practice care and strive for understanding of involved enabling individuals. But I am not very keen to let an aggressive other be. Particularly as an educator, I am vested in transformation and yearn not to dictate but to invite it, perhaps to inspire and create conditions for participation in an ethic of hospitality. At times, such yearning can threaten to topple over into righteousness and rigidity, and requires vigilance. My mode of engagement thus seems rather dependent on whether I encounter stories of marginalization or perpetration. And while debating a possible wisdom in ethical flexibility, I recognize the limitations of conditioned attachments. In his poem "Call Me By My True Names," Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones./ my legs as thin as bamboo sticks./ and I am the arms merchant./selling deadly weapons to Uganda."² Nhat Hanh advocates compassionate engagement with aggressiveness in his philosophical insight not of "being" but of "inter-being."³ This is such a deeply difficult address and aspiration.

Which brings me to my third query: I wonder if we are cognizant enough of the enormous demands and possibilities of decentered subjectivity. Doing our best entails service for the well being of others and the environment, and working together toward interrogating and transforming social practices that diminish rather than nourish us. Yet, in my view, it also challenges us to engage with our full dimensionality. In other words, it is not enough to think our way to decenteredness; rather, we require cultivated skill in discernment of the intimate lodgings of mind, affect, and body. To illustrate, in Thomas King's reminder that stories change with each telling,⁴ I offer a retelling of Chuang Tzu's tale of the "Empty Boat:"⁵ One morning a man entered his row boat with the intention to cross the river. As he was rowing, he saw another rowboat coming towards him, appearing as if it was about either to collide with his own or at the very least obstruct his passageway. At first the man was a bit indignant, but as he watched the other boat continue on its path, indignation morphed into irritation, then into anger and then into all-out rage. If you were observing the drama unfold from the river bank, you would at this point be seeing the man furiously upright in menacing body posture, swearing and hurling insults at the oncoming boat. So, what do you imagine happened when the two boats finally met? The answer: nothing. For when the boat arrived near enough, the man saw that it was empty. There was nobody inside. At this revelation, the man sat back down in abrupt stillness, feeling solidly foolish and ashamed.

The story of the empty boat plots an emotional minefield (or, mind-field). Its lessons are multiple, but centrally it is less about another person in the oncoming boat and more about how the man had built his anger based on the myriad assumptions,

investments, and beliefs circulating within his own head, and that he took as true enough to act out on. Chuang Tzu observes how the boat was empty but the man's mind was full with thoughts and accompanying reactive, escalating emotions. In effect, his inner dialogue disabled him from being able to be an open host; that is to be truly present and receptive to what greeted him on the lake. Chuang Tzu's philosophy is that we ourselves become empty boats. As Ruitenbergh notes, character education can be so replete with prescribed virtues it can inadvertently get in the way of receptivity and goodness. In contrast, similar to a Derridean ethic of hospitality, a Taoist ethic suggests simply, "don't be." Let go of striving for sovereignty. It recommends enduring mind-body practice in emptying ourselves of nuanced attachments to our egocentric desires and views, notions and habits of "me" and "mine." Modeling here is also important, and the empty boat or chair stands as teacher, with all of us as learners meditatively acquiring facility in unseating our deeply-seated ego selves. Each embodied experience of attachment to greed, aversion, or indifference, whether in encounters with another person or the weather, challenges us to continued practice. Wisdom stories assert that through such deliberative, meditative, space-clearing gymnastics we acquire a humble and healing no-separate self agency, becoming increasingly open and generously spirited toward unexpected and unfamiliar arrivals, open and able to access the unconditional gifts within each of us, and more open, embracing, and devotional toward one another in our light and also shadow. In conclusion, stories of emptiness call us to remember to empty our preoccupied selves in the immediacy of the present; and, in the face of contemporary adversities, to find our refuge in an inner quiet emptiness that paradoxically illuminates the way to and arrival of joyful interdependence.

-
1. Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Toronto: Anansi, 2003), 164.
 2. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* (Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 1992), 64.
 3. *Ibid.*, 86.
 4. King, *The Truth About Stories*, 1.
 5. Chuang Tzu, *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Martin Palmer (London: Arkana Penguin, 1996), 169.