

Pulled Up Short: Challenges for Education

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We must learn how to lose the game — that begins with the age of two or maybe even earlier. He, who has not learned this early, will not be able to completely handle the greater tasks of adult life.¹

Reb Saunders, a character in Chaim Potok's novel, *The Chosen*, poses the following questions about his son's education:

I looked at my Daniel when he was four years old, and I said to myself, How will I teach this mind what it is to have a soul? How will I teach this mind to understand pain? How will I teach it to *want* to take on another person's suffering?²

That pain should be a focus for education is not a new idea. Maxine Greene writes: "Children and young persons inhabit a world of fearful moral uncertainty, a world in which it appears that almost nothing can be done to reduce suffering, contain massacres, and protect human rights."³ Educators therefore must teach individuals "to strain toward conceptions of a better order of things... what *ought* to be."⁴ Realizing Greene's vision, teachers can provide students opportunities to develop the skills, judgments, and dispositions necessary to alleviate suffering caused by social, political, and economic injustice. On this view, pain is a legitimate educational concern because it represents the kind of experience individuals can and should learn to prevent and overcome.

Saunders reminds us, however, that pain is not exclusively an injustice to uproot, a disorder to cure, or a wrong to set right. Pain is also an inevitable part of being alive. I call this kind of pain "being pulled up short." When we are pulled up short, events we neither want nor foresee and to which we may believe we are immune interrupt our lives and challenge our self-understanding in ways we cannot imagine in advance of living through them.

Helping students understand what it means to be pulled up short seems especially timely in the wake of September 11th.⁵ But we cannot teach students to understand the meaning of being pulled up short in the same way we teach them to constructively handle other experiences of uncertainty and doubt. Being pulled up short is a particular experience of disorientation that poses unique pedagogical demands.

To explore this claim, I offer a more complete description of being pulled up short, drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*.⁶ I then compare being pulled up short to an emotion Israel Scheffler calls "cognitive surprise."⁷ While cognitive surprise resembles being pulled up short, the two phenomena ultimately differ, both as forms of experience, and also as ways of understanding experience. Clarifying these differences deepens understanding of both phenomena and illuminates unique challenges that being pulled up short poses for teaching and learning.

LIVED UNDERSTANDING

To appreciate being pulled up short, it is helpful first to describe Gadamer's account of unproblematic understanding. Everyday, we make sense of people,

events, social institutions, rituals, and practices. “One can hardly *not* understand,” Gerald Bruns observes.⁸ Understanding is unavoidable, because we are born or “thrown” into historical contexts that already have been interpreted. “Human beings always have inherited a way of looking at things around them long before they begin to modify that way of looking,” Brice Wachterhauser explains. “Our very ability to understand at all comes from our participation in contexts that make reality meaningful in the first place.”⁹

Understanding thus is an activity we naturally live, a way of being involved in and concerned with the world. Gadamer equates “lived” understanding with “know-how” (*TM*, 260). Knowing how to get around in the world is a practical activity, requiring me to engage my situation, not observe it from afar. What are these circumstances asking of me? What is the right thing to do? Am I willing and able to respond? What I do and do not do reflects past choices and expresses the kind of person I think I am and want to become. *How* I see the world and *what* I do within it is bound up with *who* I am and *where* I am headed. Gadamer calls this process of on-going moral negotiation with oneself “application” or self-understanding. In his words: “*all such understanding is ultimately self-understanding* . . . Thus it is true in every case that a person who understands, understands himself (*sich verstehen*), projecting himself upon his possibilities” (*TM*, 260, italics in original).

In sum, lived understanding is pre-reflective practical know-how, intimately tied to self-knowledge and moral orientation. Lived understanding is not an achievement or state of mind we regulate and produce. Lived understanding signifies the existential condition of being human. To understand is to be at home, to feel we belong in our surroundings.

PULLED UP SHORT

While we may know how to get around in the world, the world also escapes being confined within what Bruns calls “the conceptual apparatus I have prepared for it, or that my time and place have prepared for it.”¹⁰ This does not mean that the world lies before us as an alien object upon which we gaze as detached spectators. The world, after all, is our abode, the medium of our lives. Thus on one level, the world can be nothing other than deeply familiar. Nonetheless, the world departs from our expectations and desires, refuses to be appropriated by us or subjected to our categories. A degree of tension always exists between what we believe, see, and hope and that which happens despite our expectations and preparation. As the saying goes, “Life is what happens when you are busy making other plans.”

While we experience the difference between the world and us when unforeseen happiness comes our way, more significant disclosures of difference occur whenever our assumptions, expectations, and desires fail to materialize, are thwarted or reversed. Such disappointments of expectation Gadamer calls “being pulled up short” (*TM*, 268). Gadamer introduces this phrase in relation to reading texts. But being pulled up short encompasses other experiences in which our expectations are denied. “[E]xperience is initially always an experience of negation: something is not what we supposed it to be,” Gadamer asserts (*TM*, 354).¹¹ Being pulled up short is not confined to times of profound upheaval; life is full of everyday kinds of

shattering. No one, Gadamer declares, is exempt from being pulled up short. "Experience in this sense belongs to the historical nature of man" (*TM*, 356).

Tibetan Buddhism makes a similar claim, Walter Parker observes. "Ancient Tibetan Buddhist texts contain various taxonomies of life's ruptures and refusals," Parker explains.

According to one, there are eight refusals, separated into two groups: the Big Five and the Daily Three. Any one of these will get your attention. The Big Five are birth, old age, sickness, death, and physical pain. The Daily Three are misfortune (getting what you don't want), longing (not getting what you do want), and impermanence (the haunting certainty that the present moment, whether peace or terror, will not last).¹²

The experience Parker calls "misfortune" best illustrates being pulled up short. Being pulled up short is a particular misfortune we unwittingly bring on ourselves as a consequence of trying to manage or circumvent other events in Parker's taxonomy. Longing for desires to be fulfilled, we pursue big dreams. Attempting to outrun death, we chase success and fame. We want permanence and so we hold onto relationships.

But the steps we take to improve our lives instead contribute to our undoing. Pursuing dreams, we are pulled up short when obsessive attempts to quench our desires leave us feeling bereft. We are pulled up short when, despite great effort, our drive to be larger than life deadens our zest for living. Clutching others, we are pulled up short when our behavior leads to betrayal or rejection.

Confounding what we expect, being pulled up short invariably catches us off-guard, challenging "know-how" and its accompanying sense of security and control. Cherished self-assumptions also are thrown into doubt. Being pulled up short discloses attitudes, qualities, and behaviors we would prefer to disown, deny, or recognize only insofar as we project them onto others. What seemed natural or right is exposed as an evasion of responsibility, a blind spot that diminishes or distorts who and how we are in the world.¹³ Our dreams, fueled by restless ambition, are vain attempts to fill a spiritual void. Our drive for notoriety is an effort to hide despair. Rejections and betrayals disclose that we are more afraid of instability than we are concerned with supporting others. Indeed, the self-perceptions (self-deceptions) we try hardest to protect are most vulnerable to being pulled up short.

Being pulled up short thus disrupts self-inflation, betraying false pride, invincibility, or exaggerated desire for control. Living through this experience we ask: How could I have been so blind? Why did I not see this coming? Insight does not arise in advance of or apart from being pulled up short; to be pulled up short is just to see that I have been deluding myself. Admitting self-deception is a kind of divestment, Bruns explains. "[N]othing is acquired, nothing is grasped or objectified in its essence; instead, *everything is taken away*."¹⁴ Seeing that my self-understanding has stopped working and no longer makes sense can leave me feeling at a loss.

We tend to think that loss is unfortunate, something to avoid. But insofar as being pulled up short surfaces entrenched assumptions in lived understanding that would otherwise remain invisible, loss can be an opening to recognize perspectives that we tend to dismiss or ignore when life is going our way. Our possibilities are not

endless. Thus happiness may not lie in future gratification but in learning to accept the present, good and bad. Fame will not release us from death. Accepting this may leave us time us to engage in acts of kindness, the impact of which may reverberate far beyond our own lives. Letting go can enhance, not inhibit, relations. Accepting change, friendships can grow more stable.

This level of insight does not represent a gradual alteration or expansion of our existing worldview. It is instead a radical transformation. Georgia Warnke explains: "What we experience is the error or partiality of our previous views and we experience this in such a way that we are now too experienced or sophisticated to relive the experience of believing them."¹⁵ Having been pulled up short, there is no going back. Life will never again be the same.

We might be tempted to conclude that transformation is a gain, not a loss. What we gain when we are pulled up short is self-understanding that is more clear, honest, and deep. But to call understanding a "gain" worries Gadamer. Doing so suggests that self-insight is a shield we fashion to prevent or protect us from ever again being pulled up short. By improving our skills and expanding our knowledge, we can make and re-make ourselves, much like master craftsmen mold objects. This false assumption, Gadamer argues, is not just personal or idiosyncratic. It shapes entire ages and cultures, particularly in the West.

We are not at our own disposal, Gadamer insists. Self-understanding is not entirely subject to regulation by desire or will (*TM*, 314-17). Even transformations in self-understanding that arise when we are pulled up short are susceptible to being pulled up short. To deny this is to perpetuate the condition of self-inflation that only increases the likelihood that we will be pulled up short again.

Ultimately, Gadamer concludes, the insight of being pulled up short is less a gain or self-achievement than an acknowledgement of boundaries and limits:

What a man has to learn through suffering is not this or that particular thing, but insight into the limitations of humanity... into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine.... To acknowledge what is does not just mean to recognize what is at this moment, but to have insight into the limited degree to which the future is still open to expectation or planning or, even more fundamentally, to have the insight that all the expectation and planning of finite beings is finite and limited (*TM*, 357).

To accept limitation is not just to recognize fallibility as a contingent condition. It is to admit that we are limited in principle. "Finitude," Gadamer says, is the inescapable condition of being human.¹⁶

We can choose to ignore, evade, or deny human limitation. Or we can choose to acknowledge our finitude and realize that every gain in self-understanding entails loss.¹⁷ While accepting this paradox is difficult, doing so can free us from the despair that denying limits arouses. In this way, being pulled up short can liberate us to become more fully human and present in the world.

To summarize, being pulled up short arrests, reverses, or negates pre-reflective lived understanding of world and self. Being pulled up short is a misfortune we bring on ourselves, because we try to outrun or outwit human finitude. This disorienting experience of loss reveals that despite our planning, life may unfold in ways we do

not foresee or want. While this experience is painful, living through it can awaken us to choices we could not otherwise imagine.

PULLED UP SHORT AND COGNITIVE SURPRISE

To claim that educators are unfamiliar with being pulled up short may seem like an exaggeration. Cognitive psychologists, for instance, investigate how experts recognize and respond to mistakes in their own thinking. While these studies illuminate an important experience of doubt, they fail to address being pulled up short and indeed may obscure our understanding of that phenomenon.

To see why, it is helpful to examine Israel Scheffler's term, "cognitive surprise." The assumptions Scheffler makes about what happens when we face our own misunderstandings are shared by many cognitive psychologists and educators. Exploring these assumptions reveals why cognitive surprise and being pulled up short differ, and why these experiences require different pedagogical strategies.

Scheffler defines surprise as "a cognitive emotion, resting on the (epistemologically relevant) supposition that what has happened conflicts with prior expectation" (*CE*, 181-82). Acknowledging surprise, we affirm, "The evidence isn't wrong. *My beliefs* about what I thought would occur are mistaken." Admitting our mistakes and accepting confounding evidence is essential for rational inquiry. "Receptive to surprise, we are capable of learning from experience," Scheffler says, "capable, that is, of acknowledging the inadequacies of our initial beliefs, and recognizing the need for their improvement" (*CE*, 182).

But acknowledging conflict between evidence and beliefs is hard. Surprising evidence is not simply unanticipated: it rebukes assumptions in ways that we don't foresee. Moreover, the expectations that evidence refutes are central to "one's basic orientation" (*CE*, 182). Acknowledging unforeseen conflict between expectations and evidence thus involves "a certain vulnerability; it means the risk of a possibly painful unsettling of one's beliefs, with the attendant need to rework one's expectations and redirect one's conduct" (*CE*, 182).

We risk more than vulnerability when we admit surprise. We also confront a psychological paradox. "Is [receptivity to surprise] not an impossibly mixed emotion," Scheffler asks, "like elation at despair, or happiness at depression?" (*CE*, 185).

Given that acknowledging surprise seems contradictory and makes us feel vulnerable, how is it possible to educate the disposition to acknowledge our mistakes? Responding to this quandary, Scheffler reminds us that surprise is an uncertain condition that can be distinguished from the feelings it provokes (*CE*, 185). The feelings that accompany uncertainty can be mixed. We can welcome this condition, feeling curiosity and wonder. Or, we can shrink from uncertainty and yield to confusion and panic.

Following Dewey, Scheffler counsels teachers to help students learn to regulate their emotions. Cultivating the disposition to identify, differentiate, and organize emotions, teachers can help students recognize and act on productive feelings. At the same time, students learn to moderate or curb confusion, or harmonize agitated

feelings into a more balanced emotional structure. By “exercising control over undesirable impulses” and acting on positive emotions, students can face and master the unsettling experience of admitting limitation (*CE*, 173, 183).

Strengthening the disposition to accept limitation does not diminish the pain of conflict or guarantee that we can foresee and prevent future surprises. While it is true that learning from experience, we achieve “new explanatory structures,” new structures themselves may conflict with future evidence (*CE*, 186). Conflict may actually intensify as explanations and theories grow more expansive and deep. The disposition to admit surprise thus expresses understanding that cognition is “two-sided and has its own rhythm; it stabilizes and coordinates; it also unsettles and divides” (*CE*, 186).

Cognitive surprise shares several features with being pulled up short. In both cases, beliefs that are central to our basic orientation are unsettled in ways we do not foresee. Neither explanatory structures nor lived understanding can improve unless we admit when our assumptions are unexpectedly foiled. This admission is an assertion of limitation, an acknowledgement that what happens does not always coincide with our beliefs and desires.

While cognitive surprise and being pulled up short are similar, ultimately, they diverge. The salient difference comes to light when we examine the feature that is key to both experiences: acknowledging limitation. In the case of cognitive surprise, limitation pertains to our expectations about evidence we confront. An experiment refutes our hypothesis; our interpretation of a passage fails to harmonize with the rest of a text. If we regulate our feelings, we can recognize and admit these mistakes. Uncertainty may tempt us to yield to confusion and conflate evidence with belief. But uncertainty need not overwhelm and extinguish the disposition to curb panic, choose curiosity, and admit when our beliefs are wrong.

Surprise thus may underscore the limits of *cognition*. Nevertheless, it does not address the limits of *being human*. When we experience cognitive surprise, we retain the capacity and desire to govern our emotions, apart from and in spite of conditions that test our regulative powers. Indeed, Scheffler believes that confronting uncertainty can be a chance to strengthen the disposition to control how we feel.

The purported ability to acknowledge mistakes by regulating emotions in advance of uncertainty is precisely what being pulled up short rebukes. When we are pulled up short, we *succumb* to uncertainty and live through the confusion Scheffler says we can and should control. To expect that we can always regulate confusion and never yield to this experience represents the kind of self-deception that makes it likely we will be pulled up short. Cognitive surprise assumes we can function, even when our beliefs are mistaken. When we are pulled up short, our sense of who we are and what we can do is derailed on a more fundamental level. We may *think* we are open to unforeseen events; being pulled up short exposes us to ways of being open we cannot fathom on our own.

Living through disorientation does not annihilate rational character or inhibit rational understanding. Insofar as being pulled up short is just to see that what happens differs from what we expect, submitting to confusion can enrich rational

thinking and action. But transformations of understanding are not always subject to our will or divorced from conditions we confront. Being pulled up short illustrates that sometimes transformation cannot occur until we live through experiences we do not control.

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

We do not choose to be pulled up short or to be cognitively surprised. We can, however, choose to recognize these experiences when they happen and accept that beliefs and events sometimes conflict. To the extent that the capability, desire, and disposition to make this choice can be taught, cognitive surprise and being pulled up short represent important educational concerns. The pedagogic goals and challenges differ in each case, however. The example of interpreting texts illustrates this point.

Sam Wineburg's analysis of how an expert historian confronts deficiencies in his own thinking provides an illustration of cognitive surprise.¹⁸ Wineburg documents habits of thought, not emotional responses. Nonetheless, Wineburg's work shares Scheffler's assumptions about self-regulation, cognition, and rational inquiry.

Wineburg presented a historian with a text, the interpretation of which required factual knowledge the historian lacked. Regulating the impulse to seek confirmation, the historian was able to acknowledge evidence that contradicted his expectations.¹⁹ The historian's skill in specifying his ignorance represents a domain-specific form of metacognition, which required the historian to show "restraint and self-awareness in the face of the first ideas that popped into his mind."²⁰ The combination of self-regulation and recognition of contextual difference enabled the historian to render a reasonable and valid interpretation. This approach to reading history, Wineburg concludes, "underscores its strangeness, rather than its continuity, with today."²¹

Gerald Bruns describes a different experience with texts, one that illustrates being pulled up short. Following Luther, Bruns maintains that we do not understand texts "at a distance." Understanding rather involves "having an internal connection with what is understood."²² Connection does not mean we vicariously experience or empathetically identify with the text's world. Assumptions are not confirmed when we understand on this level. Rather, we "get" a text, because it reveals us to ourselves. Literature is "brought home" when it interrupts our complacency and exposes self-deceptions we would otherwise deny.²³ This kind of understanding does not entail regulating how we respond to a text so that we can interpret it. Understanding occurs because we are seized by a text, pulled up short by its meaning and transformed.

JOURNALIST DAVID DENBY TELLS A STORY ABOUT READING

King Lear that illustrates Bruns's point. Denby believed he understood Shakespeare's text, because *King Lear* reminded Denby of his irascible mother. But reading the text thirty years after he first encountered it, Denby unexpectedly

felt something like fear. It was immense, looming, threatening; sinister and violent as well as noble, a great work that comes and finds us out....Much of it — details of the story and individual lines — came back readily enough, and with the force of accusation.²⁴

Reading *Lear* now, Denby saw something he had not seen before. Denby's mother may have resembled King Lear. But *Denby* was like Goneril and Regan, who spoke to their parent "in the tones of coldest rationality."²⁵ Denby relates that

the famous lines mortified me as I read the play again, because I was forever trying to reason with my mother, trying to separate her real difficulties from her imagining of difficulty... How could I not have realized that, emotionally, [my mother] needed reassurance, not reality?²⁶

Both Denby and the historian seek to understand texts. To understand, both must admit that texts refute what they know. For the historian, understanding requires coping with cognitive surprise. Controlling his impulse to conflate expectations and evidence, the historian achieves the emotional distance that enables him to clearly grasp Wineburg's document. Understanding for Denby requires being pulled up short. Submitting to the fear *King Lear* provokes, not regulating this emotion, enables Denby to experience how the text exposes his self-deception. Acknowledging self-deception, in turn, brings Denby to a deeper understanding of Shakespeare's drama.

These are two very different ways of reading texts. I do not believe they are mutually exclusive. In fact, they may intersect or require each other. But teachers must not confuse them, or use strategies appropriate to one in order to teach the other. Self-regulation may prevent Denby from understanding *King Lear*, because it would perpetuate the false conclusion that Denby is not like Lear's daughters. Had the historian felt that Wineburg's document pulled him up short, he might have lost the confidence he needed to productively respond to cognitive surprise.

Choosing to acknowledge cognitive surprise and regulate emotions is hard. Nonetheless, this choice in principle is possible to teach, because the ability to control our feelings is not tied to conditions that provoke them. Teachers thus can reinforce the disposition to acknowledge surprise, before exposing students to experiences wherein their self-understanding is tested.

Educating the disposition to be pulled up short presents a more intractable dilemma. The relation between understanding and experience is more intimate when we're pulled up short. Teachers cannot put students "in the way" of being pulled up short, structuring conditions such that self-exposure is likely. Unless a student already is disposed to acknowledge being pulled up short, she will miss or resist submitting to this experience. At the same time, the disposition to succumb to and understand this experience cannot be realized in advance of living through the shattering of self-deception.

I think that some undergraduate humanities teachers in fact are succeeding in helping students understand being pulled up short.²⁷ It behooves us to conduct wisdom of practice studies to learn more about what successful teachers do and why. Investigating this issue, we come closer to answering Reb Saunders's question and enriching our children's education.

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Diversity of Europe," in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 233.

2. Chaim Potok, *The Chosen* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1967), 265.
3. Maxine Greene, "Art and Imagination: Reclaiming the Sense of Possibility," *Phi Delta Kappan* (January 1995), 378.
4. Greene, "Art and Imagination," 379.
5. I believe September 11th combines the two kinds of pain Greene and Reb Saunders articulate.
6. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* second rev., ed. and trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1993). See esp. 346-62, xxiv, 268. For all subsequent references this text will be cited as *TM*.
7. Israel Scheffler, "In Praise of the Cognitive Emotions," *Teachers College Record* 79, no. 2 (1977), 171-86. I am grateful to Jon Levisohn for recommending this article. For all subsequent references this text will be cited as *CE*.
8. Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 3.
9. Brice R. Wachterhauser, "Introduction: History and Language in Understanding," in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 22.
10. Bruns, *Hermeneutics*, 3 and 158.
11. Gadamer calls this type of experience, *Ehrfahrung*.
12. Walter Parker, (Paper delivered at a faculty retreat, University of Washington College of Education).
13. Bruns, *Hermeneutics*, 148. Bruns cites Levinas's definition of exposure.
14. *Ibid.*, 182.
15. Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 26.
16. Bruns, *Hermeneutics*, 180. Also see Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: Practical Judgment and the Lure of Technique* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 131.
17. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1981), 103-4.
18. Sam Wineburg, "Reading Abraham Lincoln: An Expert/Expert Study in the Interpretation of Historical Texts," *Cognitive Science* 22, no. 3 (1998), 319-46. My thanks to Wineburg for calling my attention to this study.
19. *Ibid.*, 332.
20. *Ibid.*, 338.
21. *Ibid.*, 339.
22. Bruns, *Hermeneutics*, 151.
23. *Ibid.*, 147.
24. David Denby, *Great Books* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 293.
25. *Ibid.*, 307.
26. *Ibid.*, 308.
27. See, for example, Denby's *Great Books*, 106-16 and 292-308.