

Understanding Human Finitude: Educating for Insight

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September 11, 2001 was a defining moment in United States history. Deborah Kerdeman understands it as one of those “events we neither want nor foresee and to which we may believe we’re immune;” one where “there is no going back.” Motivated, I presume, by a desire to help her self, and her students, come to terms with this life-altering experience, Kerdeman looks to Hans-Georg Gadamer and his notion of “being pulled up short.” She extends his use of the term from the context of reading a text, to disorienting moments in our everyday life. Then she employs Israel Scheffler’s concept of “cognitive surprise” in a comparative way to draw out the unique pedagogical challenges that come with “being pulled up short.” Insisting that the latter is qualitatively different from “other experiences of uncertainty and doubt,” she at the same time reminds us that it “is not confined to times of profound upheaval; life is full of everyday kinds of shattering.”

So, on the one hand, we all have disorienting experiences — they are part of being human. Yet, in order to grasp their meaning, something different is required from Gadamer’s notion of everyday “lived” understanding. This pre-reflective know-how, is not adequate to the task when our everyday conceptual framework and references do not work — when what we experience “is not compatible with what we had expected.”¹

If this was not challenging enough, Gadamer goes on to tell us that not only are our “foremeanings” inadequate when it comes to grasping these unexpected events, they may even “give rise to *misunderstandings*.” (*TM*, 268, emphasis added). Not to worry though. He rescues us from the threat and fear of misunderstandings by reminding us that they can be openings to *fuller* understanding: “we cannot stick blindly to our own fore-meaning about the thing if we want to understand the meaning of another” (*TM*, 268). All he asks “is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text” (*Ibid.*). *All he asks*... Hmm. Remaining open to other meanings, to the “fluid multiplicity of possibilities” raises interesting challenges for pedagogy (*TM*, 268). Openness, multiplicity, uncertainty. Quite the opposite from what everyday “know-how” helps us with. Security, control, predictability are swept away in the disorienting moments of being pulled up short.

It is no accident that Kerdeman introduces Tibetan Buddhism as a parallel framework at this point in her essay: when our everyday sense making fails us, when “the world departs from our expectations and desires,” we experience disappointment and suffering. Suffering and disappointment appear as we face our delusions of control and invincibility. Suffering and disappointment figure prominently in eastern religion and philosophy. Paradoxically, it is by surrendering to the existential reality and inevitability of our suffering that we may find happiness. This acceptance releases us.

Resonating with some elements of eastern philosophy, even as he invokes the Greeks, Gadamer suggests that when we are pulled up short, we are reminded that

we cannot control everything; that some things are beyond our “planning reason” (*TM*, 357). Furthermore, by experiencing suffering, disappointment, disorientation, and disillusionment, we have the opportunity to become more insightful, more discerning. Citing Aeschylus, Gadamer insists that

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. It is ultimately a religious insight (*TM*, 357).

The plot thickens....How are we educators supposed to educate for this (religious) insight? For an understanding of our own limitations in relation to “the divine?” Kerdeman addresses the paradoxical situation of self-understanding that results from being pulled up short — especially for us in the West. It may be the case, she says, that we “gain” more, clearer and deeper insight — but we also may then try to use this insight to fortify ourselves against further disorientation. Another possibility is that our quest for certainty and for control could be mediated by an acceptance of our boundaries and limitations. According to Kerdeman, “while this experience is painful, living through it can awaken us to choices we could not otherwise imagine.”

“Awaken us to choices we could not otherwise imagine.” It is here that I want to resurrect Maxine Greene to assist us. Early on in her essay, Kerdeman inserts Greene into the conversation about preparing children for pain. She suggests that Greene’s vision can provide “opportunities to develop the skills, judgments, and dispositions necessary to alleviate suffering caused by social, political, and economic injustice.” But Kerdeman finds this an inadequate response to being pulled up short because it assumes that people “can and should learn to prevent and overcome” pain.

I think that this is a narrow reading of Greene and believe that her work can offer us much more, particularly in light of the literary *entré* provided by Kerdeman at the end of her essay. As an existential phenomenologist and aesthetic educator, Greene has much to say about “wide-awakeness” and the power of the imagination in opening new horizons. And, like Gadamer, Greene is aware of the uncertainty and incompleteness of the world. She would agree with his assessment that “the truly experienced person is one...who knows that he is master neither of time nor the future. The experienced man knows that all foresight is limited and all plans uncertain” (*TM*, 357). She would also resist, as would Gadamer, the rational solutions of Dewey or Scheffler, arguing that most existential problems synonymous with the human condition are “insoluble.” This is reflected in her approach to aesthetic education: “We are interested in education here, not schooling. We are interested in openings, in unexplored possibilities, not in the predictable or the quantifiable, not in what is thought of as social control. For us, education signifies an initiation into new ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, moving. It signifies the nurture of a special kind of reflectiveness and expressiveness, a reaching out for meanings, a learning to learn.”²

Her position connects strongly to Gadamer’s understanding of “hermeneutical consciousness” and his love of multiplicity; what Bakhtin would call heteroglossia

(*TM*, 268). I want to suggest that educating for insight into the finitude of human existence is possible through the development of hermeneutical consciousness. As Gadamer says,

the hermeneutical task becomes of itself a questioning of things...A person trying to understand something will not resign himself from the start to relying on his own accidental fore-meanings...[to the] foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices (*TM*, 269).

This is echoed in Greene's commitment to aesthetic education, which to her is "integral to the development of persons — to their cognitive, perceptual, emotional, and imaginative development. We see it as part of the human effort to seek a greater coherence in the world. We see it as an effort to move individuals (working together, searching together) to seek a grounding for themselves, so that they may break through the 'cotton wool' of dailyness and passivity and boredom and come awake to the colored, sounding, problematic world."³

Wide-awakeness. Insight. Openness to new and multiple understandings. Learning to learn. We as educators may not be able (nor want to) develop the (emotional) disposition in our students to prevent their suffering when pulled up short. But through a range of aesthetic experiences, the arts may help us with those shattering moments we are all bound to have — just from being alive in the world. They may be just the kind of experiences that Gadamer hopes make us "particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself" (*TM*, 355). Deborah Kerdeman has opened up one such experience for us through this marvelous, insightful essay.

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2002), 268. For all subsequent references this text will be cited as *TM*.

2. Maxine Greene, *Variations on a Blue Guitar: The Lincoln Center Institute Lectures on Aesthetic Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 7.

3. *Ibid.*, 7.