

Risking hope in a worried world

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Abstract

Hope is at the heart of the educational endeavour. Yet it is a challenge for educators to sustain a sense of hope in a worried world where terrorism, mass migrations, global warming and ultra-right political movements are on the rise. Acknowledging that hopefulness always involves risk, this article identifies three pedagogical practices which support potential and possibility in children: letting go of worry, engaging in the pleasures of forgetting, and learning to wait. Drawing on his work as an early childhood educator, AIDS advocate and caregiver to his aging parents, the author suggests that self-restraint – checking the impulse to fix and remediate – may be the most effective way to help others. Leaving aside excessive rules and abstract theories enables teachers to stay in the moment and in relation with others. Rejecting a blind hope that defends against remembering the ravages of personal and social histories, the author proposes embracing a modulated or educated hope (José Muñoz) that can keep us grounded in the real, even as we imagine the world differently.

Keywords

Children, early childhood, educated hope, hope, literacy, pedagogy, risk

I grew up in a worried world, a world of the Holocaust, Hiroshima and the long shadow of the Great Depression. But every world is worried in a different way. Today, the impact of terrorism, mass migrations and climate warming loom large, to say nothing of the rise of ultra-right political movements across the globe.

Many policymakers have responded to these worries by holding on ever more tightly to the known and knowable, and by trying to eliminate uncertainty from young children's lives. From safety-first playgrounds devoid of real challenges to a narrow academic curriculum, children are discouraged from the kind of imaginative letting-go early childhood educators know is essential to learning. In turn, their teachers are required to enter the classroom grasping preset lesson plans, lists of universal standards and quantitative measures of achievement.

In this article I ask: How is it possible to risk hope in times like these? What does hope even look like in a worried world? My search for an answer to these questions feels urgent, propelled as it is by my understanding that hope is at the heart of the educational endeavour. At the same time,

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the search is shaped by my understanding that hope, like love, always involves risk. Who does not have unrealized dreams, unfulfilled desires? Who has not suffered failed romances with ideas that held out the allure of remaking the world?

Adam Phillips, psychoanalyst and Freud biographer, with his usual quirky ability to turn things inside out, reminds us that managing disappointment is central to human experience (Choder-Goldman, 2014). It can as easily lead to inspiration and motivation as to defeat and cynicism. Without risk and a tolerance for disappointment, without wholehearted engagement in the moment, there is no future.

How do we hold a space for hope in difficult times? Here, I propose that this project has three closely interconnected components. The first is letting go of worry. While a modicum of worry indicates a healthy concern for the future, I am referring to the kind of worry that turns into a way of life – the kind of worry that becomes a process in continual search of content. Second, hope requires that we allow ourselves the pleasures of forgetting, this in the interest of creating space for the new and unrehearsed to emerge. Finally, holding a space for hope involves learning to practise the arts of waiting, watching and holding back. Resisting the mania to fix and remediate the unsettling allows classrooms to become places in which difficult knowledges, with all their ambiguities and uncertainties, fund rich intellectual and emotional lives.

My turn towards hope follows directly from a recent article in which I described how, after Kierkegaard, I learned to embrace anxiety and to attend, after Foucault, to frank speech (Silin, 2015) – that is, to speech which reflects and connects what we say to who we are in the world, as opposed to speech that is disembodied and links us only to other people's words and ideas, not to our lived lives.

Letting go of worry

In the interest of frank speech and in moving from larger questions of existential anxiety to the more focused question of worry, I begin by parsing a worry that runs rife in my own age cohort of the 'young old' – that is, the challenge of sustaining a sense of social relevance in a youth-oriented world.

All scholars are haunted by the need to keep up with the latest literature in their fields. As a graduate student, I channelled this worry into taking copious notes on everything I read. Only with the degree completed did I stop reading for the millennium and start reading for the moment. Even after my note-taking became more selective – a conversation with the author, with myself, rather than an encyclopaedic project – I waited three decades before letting go of the dozen Bankers Boxes piled high in my basement, heavy with Manila folders and the closely ruled legal pads I preferred. Unopened for decades, the boxes were an archive of youthful anxiety, a dream of intellectual control.

If she were alive today, Eve Sedgwick might point to my years of meticulous note-taking as an example of the hermeneutics of suspicion, and my trip to the local recycling facility the summer morning when I unburdened myself of so much history as signalling a move towards a more reparative hermeneutics. Sedgwick (2003), who deconstructs our epistemological projects through Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic lens, posits that we work along a spectrum from a paranoid position, in which we seek to control and eliminate risk, to a depressive position, in which we are able to tolerate greater uncertainty and not knowing. Sedgwick emphasizes that we are constantly moving between the hypervigilance of the paranoid position, ever alert to dangers from the outside, and the flexibility of the depressive position, when we are able to construct a fuller, more complicated object world in which love, rather than hate and anxiety, dominates.

As a seasoned scholar, I want to acknowledge how ideas form in a web of human connections, but I also want to respect the familiar adage that less is often more. I mark moods, emotions and ideas that arise inside of me as I read, but am less interested in creating carefully honed reviews of

the literature and the production of scholarship that becomes an end in itself. Having let go, literally and figuratively, of so much past, I am a less worried and, I hope, more imaginative writer in closer touch with what really matters. In a similar way, I want to suggest that letting go can lead to less worried classrooms, in which students have more time to process their experiences – more time for what Eleanor Duckworth (1996) referred to as ‘the having of wonderful ideas’.

By example, I point to a two-decade-old essay by David Jardine and Pam Rinehart (1993) describing the visit of a third-grade class to an exhibit of Inuit Indian artefacts, including a display about indigenous dance ceremonies. At the conclusion of every dance, the Inuit throw their beautiful, carefully crafted masks into the fire. Sometimes, one accidentally rolls out of the fire, and visitors try to rescue it – an act that leads the Inuit guide at the exhibit to comment: ‘We wonder why they might want to save them’.

Jardine and Rinehart use this moment, and the students’ subsequent resistance to writing about the trip, to ask why preserving traces of events has become such an obsession. Why do so many educators believe that only with writing can an experience be pedagogically valuable? Is not the value in the experience itself?

While it is undoubtedly true that the production of text turns experience into cultural capital, there is a price to be paid. Beyond the potential of student alienation – and I do not want to underestimate this at all – there is the way that constant articulation robs us of opportunities for our experience to settle and enrich the ground from which new ideas spring. When the concern for public representation becomes all-consuming, there is little time for silence and the inward gaze.

To be sure, letting go is always bittersweet, but it is also an essential habit of mind for teachers. Allowing an experience to come to an end, full stop – whether a one-off class trip or an entire year with children – has become a lost art. In the age of accountability, each student must capture every experience in text and photographs, reports and videos, journals and diaries, before it has had time to resonate and come to rest.

The pleasure of forgetting

Here, I draw on my own experience as a nursery school teacher. In the best progressive tradition, I kept detailed anecdotal records about children and samples of their work. But, to be honest, much of this observing and recording occurred prior to parent conferences. It was a way to focus conversations that were often awkward and stressful for a young teacher. All this was a far cry from the work of teachers in our evidence-based world, where the continuous monitoring and surveillance of student progress has become an overwhelming task.

And yes, at the end of each year, taking apart the classroom, I was always surprised to realize that the varied documents papering the walls and objects filling the shelves also constituted an archive giving testimony to the life of the group as much as, if not more than, the progress of individual children: the carefully written ‘experience charts’, containing recipes; lists of supplies to purchase for the new aquarium; children’s descriptions of life with their siblings; parents’ occupations; block buildings under construction and completed.

Taking the room apart provided us – children and teachers together – with the opportunity to review the year and its accomplishments. But once the artefacts were dispersed, they were soon forgotten, making it easier to meet next year’s group with fresh eyes and new hopes. Forgetting allows a certain forgiveness of the past; the current group of children need not be haunted by the preceding one – the child of 2017 is not overshadowed by her 2016 self. Each year is a beginning, a new assemblage of people and things.

The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer celebrates the powerful dialectic between remembering and forgetting when he writes:

forgetting is closely related to keeping in mind and remembering; forgetting is not merely an absence and a lack but ... a condition of the life of the mind. Only by forgetting does the mind have the possibility of total renewal, the capacity to see everything with fresh eyes, so that what is long familiar fuses with the new.

(Gadamer, 1989: 16)

I connect the way that forgetting nourishes the unspoken mind to the kind of tacit knowledge that Michael Polanyi (1966) says fuels our creative efforts. Relying on writing, we can lose sight of the need to remember for ourselves and of the way that memory shifts over time, helping us to sort the urgent from the important, the ephemera from the essential. Jardine and Rinehart (1993: 136) suggest that we can look here to the wisdom traditions to help create classrooms with a better balance between the well-articulated life and the pleasures of 'walking around unwritten'.

I would like to think that, as a teacher, I was less concerned about holding each child accountable for leaving traces of her experience and permitting myself to be forgetful, because I trusted the collective memory of the group when we wanted to recall the past. I believed that allowing experiences to wash over children might promote a deeper mindfulness than can be captured in an immediate record. Some stories were simply to be savoured, rather than parsed apart for what they might teach about their rhetorical structures and genre.

Waiting

My penchant for waiting as a young teacher – a reluctance to intervene in the classroom as children sorted out their own lives – was both notable and a frequent source of critique from my supervisors, who were committed to greater social engineering.

My memories of those early years of teaching – almost half a century ago – may be less than perfect. Certainly, my ability to articulate the ideas that fuelled my practices, falling as they did in the gap between the traditional psychoanalytic models and the extremes of Summerhillian neglect, was limited. What is clear is how disturbed I was in the 1990s to see my graduate students placed in classrooms where teachers stepped in at the first signs of trouble among children to proffer formulaic conflict-resolution strategies. It seemed to me that the popular peer-mediation programmes of the day short-circuited both the emotions of the children and the opportunity for them to sort things out on their own. The formulas offered to the children shoehorned their feelings into predetermined categories before they had a chance to know them on their own terms.

At the same time, I encountered the writings of Tad Aoki (1992) and Max van Manen (1991), who both, in their elegant and passionate language, described the workings of pedagogical tact and thoughtfulness. Phenomenologically grounded, they spoke to what it means to live with others who may be experiencing distress, and how it is that kindness and care are best expressed – by a look, a touch, an unspoken presence. When adults hold back, exercise self-restraint, they may teach the most profound lessons of all about how to be alongside another in difficult times. Aoki taught me that sometimes the act of bearing witness is of far greater value than all our frenzied attempts to fix and cure another's suffering. And this is a critical lesson that I took out of the classroom and into the sickroom, where I first cared for people with AIDS in the 1980s and later, in the 1990s, where I attended to the needs of my parents in their last decade of life (Silin, 2006).

We live in an impatient culture where we rush to teach even the youngest children how to be 'ready' to read, rather than allow them to find their own way to the book. While eating strawberries in winter and asparagus in the fall, we read about the advantages of everything from slow cooking to slow thinking. In this fast-paced world, waiting may be the ultimate transgressive act because it requires us to accept our limitations in time, and challenges the demand for continuous progress and the unrelenting march of the linear.

The ability to wait and witness may, in part, be characterological and, in part, an artefact of history. In *Cruising Utopia*, José Muñoz argues that the experience of waiting is endemic to the lives of people in marginalized groups. Muñoz prompts me to think about the way that I was drawn to waiting and watching in the classroom in the context of my life as a gay man – waiting as I did to come out and for my parents to accept my first partner, to read novels and to see movies in which gay life was depicted, to join with others to claim the full rights of sexual citizenship.

Although I could not have known this, I was certainly waiting, too, for Akiko Hayashi and Joseph Tobin's (2015) recent book, *Teaching Embodied*, which brings together the western social science and humanist rationales for the benefits of waiting with closely observed ethnographic data on how experienced teachers in Japan go about their classroom lives. Over time, learning to trust children and their own intuitions – being better able to discern serious from non-threatening events – seasoned teachers intervene less and hold back more. Giving up the need to act and control, they understand themselves as more present in the moment and to the children.

Gail Boldt (2016) draws similar conclusions in an autobiographical essay that identifies the parallels between becoming a classroom teacher and becoming a child therapist. What Boldt learned as a novice teacher, and the Japanese teachers know, is that in the ill-structured context of the early childhood classroom, the desire to get it right often comes between ourselves and our students. Being in meaningful relationships with children means letting go of the rules and theories we diligently study before entering the classroom or therapist's office. This is not to say that effective teachers are atheoretical, but that, over time, theory becomes sedimented into our way of being and results in practices that scholars have variously identified as techniques of the body, bodily habitus or non-linguistically coded knowledge.

Decades after becoming a teacher, Boldt has become a novice again as she prepares for a career as a therapist. As in her first days of teaching when she had to give up her desire to fix her students' problems, becoming a therapist requires that she abandon her fantasies of emotional repair in the interests of establishing trusting relationships. Playing in the sandbox at the non-verbal invitation of one young traumatized client, hour after therapeutic hour sifting sand, filing and emptying buckets, she loses herself and, most importantly, her preoccupation with helping, with saying and doing the right thing. In her own words:

By immersing myself along with my client, I offer him the comfort of being alone, in the sense of not having to answer a demand, and simultaneously being in the presence of another, so as not to be alone with the terror. (Boldt, 2016)

I also want to read Boldt's story through a very different set of eyes – those of a famous 18th-century Rabbi, the Baal Shem Tov. It is said that, walking with his disciples one day, he came across a synagogue packed with people. But the Baal Shem Tov turned back at the door and was unwilling to enter. 'Too many prayers inside, I can't go in', he said. 'But Master', asked his disciples, 'surely a room full of prayer is a good thing?' To which he replied: 'But all the prayers are stuck there in the building. None of them are going up to Heaven'.

I take this to mean that when our efforts to intercede on our own behalf or on behalf of others are governed by rules and written practices, then our best intentions may be lost. It is the 'intention' (*kavanah* in Hebrew) that matters and which we can so easily lose when we are weighed down with too much knowledge about how to teach and too much desire to right the worlds of others when they have gone askew. In the Jewish tradition, the central importance of *kavanah* is highlighted by the meaning of the word for 'sin' (*chata* in Hebrew): to miss the mark, to be absent, to do something without being present – that is, to lose touch with our intention.

I do not want to equate the therapy office with the classroom, but I do want to see Gail Boldt's story as a story of hope, one that embodies the three themes with which I began. Her narrative highlights that it is our willingness to let go of the worry accompanying too many rules and instructions which allows us to follow our intention, our *kavanah*. It also reminds us that often only through our willingness to lose ourselves can we find another. It is the waiting, resisting the impulse to intervene, that eventually makes possible the most meaningful kinds of connections.

Holding a space for hope

I began with a story common among my peers: the worry of staying socially relevant and the benefits of letting go of the desire to keep up. I end with a story from recent studies of the old-old, where I unexpectedly find a new sense of hope. Here, researchers have identified 'senior coolness', a habitus that allows the elderly to live well in the face of vulnerability and finitude (Zimmermann and Grebe, 2014). Senior coolness provides an evocative, and aspirational, counternarrative to traditional notions of dependency and despair at the end of life.

The successful elderly distance themselves from the physical and psychological indignities of aging. They exercise a certain reserve and do not impose their problems on others, and, in turn, expect others to see them as more than the sum of their problems. Those exercising senior cool recognize existential conditions of great suffering but do not allow them to obscure the positive aspects of life that remain.

Swedish researchers have identified a similar phenomenon – gerotranscendence, or a withdrawal from preoccupations with the material and rational world, and an increased engagement with the transpersonal (Tornstam, 2005). To be clear, it is a state of being that is not associated with presence or absence of specific spiritual practices. Those moving towards gerotranscendence give up concern with self and, in so doing, increase their overall satisfaction in life. They report being less lonely, even as they devote more time to personal contemplation and become more selective about social activities.

For these elderly no longer weighed down by the project of assessing the past as described by Erik and Joan Erikson in the last stage of life, gerotranscendence offers a way to think forward and move confidently into the future (Erikson, 1998). We often assume that withdrawal is a sign of depression or decline in cognitive function. Among the old-old, it may also offer increasing solace when living takes place on the borders of time itself.

Leaping across the decades from my home in early childhood to the last years of life, I am struck by the way that the lives of the successful elderly echo the three themes that enable educators of the young to hold a place for hope. The successful elderly let go of, or at the very least contain, worry. They report not allowing one area of difficulty to swamp other sources of satisfaction in life. The elderly watch and wait. They distance and detach themselves to minimize the emotional cost of otherwise painful interventions. And finally, to survive with dignity and composure, they practise a certain forgetfulness of self that also allows them to feel more connected to the transpersonal.

It is commonplace in our culture to cede a sense of hopefulness to the children. We nurture and protect the fragile children because they hold the possibility of a better world. The most powerful speech at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia in the summer of 2016 – the one that tugged most compellingly at my heart and mind – was Michelle Obama's (2016), and it was constructed around her hopes for her children and their experience growing up in the White House. I would only add that I believe that hope belongs to all of us – the oldest as well as the youngest, the most vulnerable as well as the able-bodied.

Taking my cue from the old-old who have learned to look head-on at the existential realities of their lives, I would argue for a hope that is grounded in the world such as it is. In *My Father's*

Keeper, I identified this as modulated hope, which allows us to look at the present and back at the past without becoming overwhelmed by what we see (Silin, 2006). This is in contrast to blind hope, which defends against remembering the ravages of personal and social histories.

In his reimagining of queer time, José Muñoz (2009) proposes a commitment to a similar idea, which he refers to as educated hope – a hope that projects the future in concrete terms and asks about the way things *could* be, rather than the way they *ought* to be. This is to reject escape into a banal, abstract optimism. Educated hope is anticipatory, exploring the gestures, traces and ephemera that move us from the tyranny of the here and now into the potentialities of the then and there. Alongside Muñoz, I stake my claim to the heuristic power of a modulated/educated hope with Oscar Wilde, who famously quipped: ‘A map of the world that does not include utopia is not worth glancing at’ (Wilde and Dowling, 2001: 141).

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