
Each Moment, a Child of Duration

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To become witness is to be exposed, vulnerable, to have something at stake.
Salverson, 2006, p. 146

A sleek brown-haired head surfaces next to me, a young boy, water slipping off his shoulders. Around us, laughter resounds as children of the island swing on a rope and drop, splash! into the water hole; they cheer each other on, their cries like birds rising from the jungle. “Hello,” he says, his accent betrays his foreignness, or rather it is I who am foreign, as I respond with a startled, *Alo!* My attempt to give my greeting a Parisian flare is laughable. Portuguese holds its own place in the world.

This moment, a child of duration accompanies me now, as I listen to the rain on the roof of my parents’ cottage in Quebec, countries away from this child’s surfacing, writing through the questioning that has risen like morning mist rising from the lake’s surface. Here, autumn threatens, the air has a bite in its touch.

There, at the river's edge in Brazil, the brutal heat of early spring weighs heavily, a late afternoon downburst pock-marking the water's surface.

A boy appears beside me, and I am called to attention. It is a stop (Appelbaum, 1995), *a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity*. He grins, his smile encased in braces, and I smile in recognition. Here is a child who is loved, whose parents have ambitions. "My mother says I must learn to speak. . . ." and the rest I cannot understand, my listening inadequate, his pronunciation untranslatable. I fail him in his efforts to communicate. But I attend this encounter born within the space of natality (Arendt, 1958): he sees me, and is curious. *Will I see him?*

A stop reminds us of our vulnerability; in the presence of others, we are startled to see ourselves anew. A stop is a moment of possible recognition, of reinvention, a reminder of what has been lost, an offering of what possibilities we might consider, if we reconsider our habits of engagement. A stop is an offering that attends our receiving.

In the Toronto General Hospital in 1983, a mother could return home or choose to remain for a few days so that her stitches, if any, might heal, or the newborn, if jaundiced, could receive the prescribed hours under a sunlamp. I opt for institutional care, my baby secure in the clear plastic bassinet that separated us. A waiting period, one might say, in which both child and mother adjust to each other's presence under the watchful eyes of the maternity nurse. That I might be afraid to return home, to take full responsibility for this new being, is never alluded to by the nurse attending, but I recognize my own apprehension.

On the second morning after her birth, my daughter is taken away for an injection, "just a mere prick on the foot," I am assured, and, although I am invited, I decline the opportunity to accompany her. I do not want her to equate me with acts of pain. This is the ignorance of new parenthood; we deceive ourselves that the enemy of our children is Other. On her return in the arms of the nurse, she looks about her, as if seeking me, her eyes dark with new knowledge. The myth that infants grow into who they are to become is dispelled. I realize I am in the presence of one who already knows and is waiting for my next betrayal.

Hannah Arendt (1958) asks educators if we love children enough so as to invite them into the world's renewal, not as we imagine it should be, but as it may become through their actions and presence in the world. It is the invitation of their presence, if we are willing to attend, that offers us the opportunity to reimagine ourselves. As Gordon (2001) reminds us,

Nativity stands for those moments in our lives when we take responsibility for ourselves in relation to others. In this way, natality initiates an active relation to the world. It signifies those moments in our lives (and there are many) in which we attempt to

answer the question that Arendt argues is at the basis of all action and that is posed to every newcomer to the world: “Who are you?” (p. 21)

This is not a question that one innocently confronts, for it asks us simultaneously to consider our own complicity and resistance. The question of natality demands that we ask of ourselves, who am I in this moment of encounter? How shall I now engage?

We are travelling to Brazil, the five of us—my husband, my son and his girlfriend, with my daughter joining us from Toronto. I am to present at a conference in Belem, a city at the mouth of the Amazon River. Our plan is to spend four days in the Pantanal, a feathered African safari on a Brazilian savannah plain. We are to stay at a working ranch situated where a breed of cows imported from India roam, the only bovine species capable of surviving the extremities of rain and drought that the Pantanal seasonally presents.

In Rio de Janeiro, the walls of buildings are performed in text; graffiti and murals exploit the unguarded canvases of the city. All along Copacabana Beach, vendors weave their way between supine bodies, calling out, offering sarongs, hats, beaded necklaces. Tourists ignore them, intent on perfecting a tan, or snapping photos of women’s bottoms brazenly swaying in the bright light. I feel underexposed in my sensible swimsuit. Here, in the restless ocean, swimming lengths is impossible: instead we brace our bodies to receive the waves, and, pulses quickening, dive through towering walls of water. In an instant, I am released into turbulence, deposited rudely on the top of my head, rebounding to my left shoulder, the water drains away, and dazed, disorientated, I struggle to my feet. This, then, is my introduction to Brazil, a country of messages, on walls, in waves, in the fevered sun, that warn me against my own ignorance.

En route to the ranch with our hired guide, luggage crammed into a white Volkswagen van, we are disorientated, each turn in the red dust road offers a visual surprise, the landscape unfamiliar, difficult to decipher. We are glad of our guide’s presence. He translates what we fail to see. We stop frequently, to take photographs, purchase bottled water, or attend to the many gates that prevent the cattle from roaming. Four hours into our journey, the van stops yet again. We wait for the dust to settle before opening the van doors. This waiting is a ritual with each stop we encounter. Our guide points to a nest high up in a tree where a stork tends to her young brood. We crane our necks, squinting in the light. It is noon hour, and the sun is cruel. Sweat-stained shirts cling to our backs. A bottle of water is shared. Above us, the stork, her right wing extended, white against blue, shades her three chicks from the glare of the sun. It is a tender moment.

Tenderness and patience, as the sun weighs upon us, becomes our mantra, as we seek relief from our everyday lives; we reach out, my husband and I, to embrace our son and daughter, the girlfriend watching, just a step outside the shadows of our joined bodies. How do I understand my presence in this land of toucans and emus, caimans and piranhas? What has called us present to this moment?

My son disappears in the orthodontist's chair, so young and yet already we are correcting his smile, putting him through a series of painful procedures, teeth extracted, jaw cracked open, so that he may be presentable. His new smile will bear the mark of his parents' ambitions. In the waiting room, I thumb through worn copies of *Chatelaine*, *MacLean's*, surrounded by girls in private school uniforms, boys hunched over game gear, waiting their turn in the chair. Mothers glance at each other, speculatively, time taken off work, the monthly run to the orthodontist, along with the hockey gear, gymnastics, parent-teacher interviews—these rites of passage prepare our children for a world that we have created. We are apprehensive but confident in our strategies. They will be ready, perfect smiles in place. That is our intention.

In the evening, I set aside my writing, and with my husband paddle the canoe on the lake. Evening approaches, water darkening to black gold as the mountain's shadow falls across the width of the lake. An object bobs, and we angle the canoe to approach it.

"Look, a frog! What's it doing in the middle of the lake?"

"Swimming."

"I can see that but where?" The frog bobs in the waves, the distance between shores immense, seemingly not navigable in terms of relative size.

"Should we rescue it, bring it across?" My husband laughs and with a single stroke of his paddle turns us away from what seems to me to be a struggling creature.

"It's a frog. It'll find its own way."

I think of its pending journey and the as-yet unknown dangers—a quick surfacing fish, a boat's propeller, a heron stalking in the weeds. Will it safely arrive? Two days later, my husband disturbs a garter snake in the midst of engulfing a frog. He shouts and the snake, releasing the frog, slithers across the sand into a crevice in the stonewall.

"Is the frog okay?" We bend to see, only to be startled as the frog attempts a lop-sided jump. My husband scoops it up with a bailing can from the canoe, and places it in the lake. The frog turns belly up, and so is retrieved, and placed on the shore. My husband tends to it, pours water to wash away the sand caught in the wound, two puncture marks. He places a piece of driftwood over the frog, we watch it burrow into the sand. The next morning there is no sign of the frog,

and while we stay attentive to its possible reappearance, we see no corpse nor sign of struggle nor footsteps in the sand.

In our engagement with others, what calls us to intercept, to engage, to turn away? An offer of care is an act born of complicity: who is caring for whom? In a fleeting moment of encounter, what possibilities do we create? What opportunities are lost? Who might you have become had I been present and awake?

After experiencing Brazil's feathered multitudes, I am attentive to what is absent in the forest that I have known since childhood. Each morning awakes without the chatter of birdsong that I remember. I seek the kingfisher as my husband and I paddle in our canoe, and am rewarded twice. We spot a blue heron, its neck elongates then folds back into itself, its intended prey eludes the sharp thrust of beak. A second heron shoulders the blue sky, then lands in a dead tree, camouflaged against grey blue bark. Two hummingbirds joust at the birdfeeder, whirl of wings, as they jockey for access. Loons sound peals of laughter. Last year there were seven loons on the lake, my husband frantically zooming his camera lens, as I commandeered the canoe, our chase futile. (Brazilian birds are far more accommodating, flitting within easy proximity of the camera with satisfying frequency.) This year, only three loons return.

On our kitchen wall in my parents' cottage is a painting by my brother, done when he was eighteen, the summer he had announced he was going to art school.

"What is it?" I ask, cocking my head. On a canvas of black paint, he had painted five yellow blotches of circles joined by a single red line.

"It's the song of that bird we hear every morning. Listen." He whistles the familiar tune.

"Oh," I nod uncertainly, not seeing the visual connection. Waking early this morning, I note the absence of song. Thirty years later the woods are ominously silent.

"*Où* sont les oiseaux?" I ask our next-door neighbor.

"*Ils* sont disparrus." She tells me that she spotted two blue jays on her porch railing "*au fin de juillet*," but it seems the species that sang my brother's painting has vanished. I whistle the yellow notes he painted. They sound sad and true.

Resilience is a word that surfaces as our time in Brazil unfolds. I learn how to move through the liquid heat, leisurely, limbs abandoning their habitual quickness of engagement. I learn to breathe one breath at a time. I relinquish my expectations, not only for what is, but also for whom I once thought I should be. I do not know if this is a position of wisdom, or a failing.

"Annie's Song" by John Denver plays on the radio next to my bed in the hospital, the first music I hear on the morning of my daughter's birth. I sing this song to her as she nurses at my breast, then on occasion through her years as a

toddler into her becoming a young adult. She, like her brother, sported braces. Twenty-two years after her birth, as we drive along the highway to transport her and her belongings to medical school, I sing the song silently under my breath. “You fill up my senses. . . .” Her father and I have been greedy for her continued presence at home, encouraging her to study locally, but now—travelling with her in a rented vehicle, with precious few belongings in the trunk, a computer, a couple of suitcases, a Raggedy Ann doll, her boyfriend’s gift of selected songs playing on the car’s CD player—we must give her to the world. All children leave home, and yet when the day comes, we are startled, reluctant to release them beyond our reach. *So soon?* What we had failed to understand is that she had begun her journey taking leave of us on the day of her birth, the cutting of the umbilical cord, her cry announcing her presence.

Like the edge of a stork’s extended white wing against blue sky, we tend to our young so that they might journey to horizons that beckon beyond us. We straighten their teeth, we interrupt their play, we prepare them for a world shaped by our expectations, our actions, our ambitions, our hopes. But all these, our ambitions, our aspirations, our desires, are finite. A child’s arrival in our midst is an offering to us to participate in the world’s renewal. Yet it is we who unwittingly limit who this child might become, through our insecurity, our fear, our greed, our inability to trust, our *not-yet readiness* to release what is not ours to claim.

As educators, we cannot know what has not yet been imagined; our challenge is to be willing to be surprised, to engage anew: To receive a child in our midst, and accept that child’s presence as a benediction. To learn to forgive ourselves for who we have failed to become in the presence of a child is the gift that we in turn may offer. *Take this and do it in remembrance of me. Not as I have done but as. . . .* and here our stumbling prayer takes flight, for if we have been true in our learning, if we have truly opened our hearts, then perhaps that which we truly desire—what has not yet been imagined by us—will come into being, realized into presence by our children, and our children’s children as they engage in the world’s renewal.

I am, I suspect, an odd figure arriving at this place of play on the edge of the Amazon River. I ask permission through gestured hand calligraphy to join the swimmers who greet me with surprise, then wave me in. I am received with curiosity, as yet not translated. I wade waist-deep into the mud-brown water. A child surfaces next to me, his face open to my presence, to what I have to offer, even as I recognize the lack of what I bring. It is a moment that arrests me, that calls me to attention. I smile, and, recognizing what is possible and what is not yet possible in this moment between us, I acknowledge his presence, “Obrigada.” *Thank you.*

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