

Waiting for My Son's Call: Invitation to Contemplate Possible/Impossible

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To be awake is to be alive... We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep.

—Thoreau (as cited in Greene, 1978, p. 42)

In a basket of saved letters, I retrieve the sole personal letter that Dr. Ted Aoki wrote to me, December 28th, 2001: A single page, handwritten, enclosed with a Xeroxed copy of an interview¹ with permission to me to republish it in the journal I was then editing.² His handwriting is like an old friend's conversation; you recognize his voice in the familiar loops of blue ink. His letter reminds me of another time, when professors had office hours, and the faculty club was a place for lingering conversations. His gracious wisdom is embodied in the letter that I now hold in my hands, A memory tugs at my sleeve —

“Lynn, you talk a lot about possibility,” Dr. Aoki notes, “but what about impossibility?”

I laugh. This is why I had wanted him at my doctoral defence, to offer the unexpected. I stall for time.

¹ Published in *Kapa Delta Pi Record* (Summer 1999) pp. 180-181.

² Instead of republishing the *Kapa Delta Pi Record* interview, Dr. Ted Aoki was interviewed by his son, Doug for a special issue, e-voking curriculum, in *Educational Insights*, celebrating the work of Dr. Ted Aoki and those who were inspired by him. See *Educational Insights* www.educationalinsights.ca. Archives.

“I’ve spent all these years thinking about possibility,” I tell him, “it’s impossible to contemplate impossibility.” But it seems that now I must.

Procrastination is like a lover who overstays his welcome, neither of us willing to untangle ourselves from the sheets to display our nakedness in awkward retreat to the bathroom. We no longer belong to each other. Instead of rising and attending to my work, I read the newspaper, column by column, pages strewn about bed. The traffic outside my window signals a morning’s unravelling. I am side-stepping time. My life, this emergent curriculum of lived experience (van Manen, 1997) that dances me from one obligation to the next, is one long to-do list. A common complaint. And who has not entertained fantasies of escape? Funny, really, as a curriculum scholar, to have ranted against curriculum-as-planned, only to now resent curriculum-as-lived, in search of—?³

When did I become so stuck?

Something is missing that needs attending....

Reading through Dr. Aoki’s letter, I wonder, should I revisit his question? Contemplate impossibility? Why is it so impossible to engage in my work? What (or who) am I avoiding? Why do I lie in bed, reading the *Globe & Mail*, morning after morning, reluctant to get up, waiting for my son’s call? I recognize that I am stopped.

Between closing and beginning lives a gap, a caesura, a discontinuity. The betweenness is a hinge that belongs to neither one nor the other. It is neither poised nor unpoised, yet moves both ways ...

It is the stop.

(Appelbaum, 1995, p. 15, 16)

³ See Snowber, 2006 for her understanding of a curriculum of longing.

A stop, a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity, occurs when we come to witness or experience an event, an encounter, an action, a relationship that calls us to attention, illuminating those habits of engagement that cause unease, moments that leave us wondering. Who am I?

Within this stop of recognized procrastination, I note two things:

Resistance is what matters.

I am waiting for my son's call.

Some mornings—I never know which one or at what time, although the weather is often a clue—my son yells up the stairs, “Mom, what are your plans today?” and I know he is asking if I am free. At the sound of his voice, I am propelled out of bed, in a flurry of clothes gathered, feet shoved into running shoes, clearing of windshield from winter rains, doors locked, turn of the key, and now, wide-awake, I execute a one-eighty—the car, a 1989 Toyota Corolla—and we are off to his workplace downtown in a litany of maternal exhaust: *put on your seatbelt, you should take the bus, get up earlier, be responsible, don't tell me how to drive! Are you okay?* He slouches beside me, morning stubble on his chin, *I don't want to talk about it.*

He listens impatiently as I launch into one of my stories—complaining about an overdue article, a dysfunctional relationship, or sharing of experience lived so as to impart a moral or teaching, a telling of what to do, or not—as we weave our way through traffic.

“You’re taking too long to tell your story,” he complains. “Turn left, here. Not right! Left! I just need the synopsis.”

“But I have to give you the context—” I lean on the horn.

“Mom, your stories are like a long-term investment: Listeners have to stay in for the long haul and hope they get a decent return.”

“Funny guy. Here’s your stop. Hey! Stop! You forgot your lunch!”

He taps on the window of the car door—a signal of *thanks, sorry I slammed the door, see you*, or maybe, *I love you*, and my heart stops. When did he begin doing that? This unexpected gesture that had always been my signal to the driver—friend, colleague, lover—who has given me a ride home as he or she prepares to drive off: a morse-code tap on the car window meaning *drive carefully, thank you, thanks for being my friend, I love...you*.

Could gestures be genetic?

He disappears behind reflective glass doors and I face a twenty-minute drive home, which like my stories, extends another thirty, as I linger over a latté at my local café. Delaying tactics, I know. Why am I avoiding my work—in this case, this chapter, which is refusing to allow itself to be written. What am I missing?

In the interview Dr. Aoki sent me, he writes that in our enthusiasm for metaphor,⁴ we have forgotten to pay attention to the “pedagogy of metonymic moments” that calls us to attend to our own tensions of engagement. To call our attention to such moments, Aoki places a rhetorical device, the slash “/”, between words, things, relationships, concepts such as planned/unplanned, or curriculum/instruction, student/teacher and invites us to dwell in the space between—“a tensioned space of ambiguity, ambivalence, and uncertainty but simultaneously a vibrant site” (199, p. 181). The site of the slash, says Dr. Aoki, “...looks like a simple oppositional binary space, but it is not. It is a space of doubling, where we slip into the language of “both this and that, but neither this nor that” (1999, p. 181). Dr. Aoki’s slash is an invitation to

⁴ Plato’s cave (360 B.C.E/2003), Varela’s windchimes (1987), Davis, Sumara, & Kieran’s waterfall (1996), Fels’ clothes on a clothesline (1998, 1999).

dwell in the generative space between words, actions, encounters juxtaposed.

Possible/impossible.

In the conceptualization and articulation of performative inquiry, I inserted Aoki's slashes in the word: *per/form/ance* to signal how the words inform and perform each other. It is a clever etymological trick that places us in the playground of complexity theorists, and grants me license to speak to performative inquiry as an action-site of research and learning (Fels & Stothers, 1996, Fels 1999, Fels 2011). Similarly, metonymic moments call us to attention, like a child's tug on the sleeve, offering an opportunity for inquiry and learning.

Aoki reminds educators,

“It is in this space of between that our teachers, sensitive to both curriculum-as-planned and curriculum-as-lived, dwell, likely finding it a tensioned space of ambiguity, ambivalence, and uncertainty but simultaneously a vibrant site...Confusing? Yes. Confusingly complex? Yes. But it is nevertheless a site that beckons pedagogic struggle, for such a human site promises generative possibilities and hope. It is, indeed, a site of becoming, where newness can come into being.” (1999, p. 181)

How could I have forgotten Dr. Aoki's invitation to attend to the slash “/” as it plays through and within my life? Aoki's pedagogy of metonymic moments—attending to the spaces in between—speaks of a living inquiry: a way of being in research that attends with mindful awareness to place, time, language, and self/other.⁵ I need to dwell in contemplation in the

⁵ Living inquiry, as conceptualized and practiced by Dr. Karen Meyer, who has been a mentor in my own understanding of learning and teaching as a practice of care and compassion, reciprocity and vulnerability. Living inquiry, like performative inquiry, requires that, as scholars,

space(s) between lying in bed with the *Globe & Mail*/sitting down to my computer. I must (re)turn my attention to the slash “/” between possible/ impossible. What will move me from the dis-ease of procrastination to active engagement in my work? What catalyst calls me to action? What was it I wrote earlier?

Resistance matters.

I am waiting for my son’s call.

This is a metonymic moment—a pedagogical inquiry within which dwells possible understanding and renewal.

To contemplate a slash “/” between what is desired, and what is lived, what is planned and what is unplanned, requires that I willingly dwell within an uncomfortable site of ambiguity, ambivalence and uncertainty—embracing that which invites disruption from my state of procrastination, a son’s call, to engage in a vibrant if troubling site of performing absence/presence.

I am waiting for my son’s call, his invitation to engage. He calls me into presence. This moment of recognition matters. Natality, as imagined by philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958), invites us to come to thoughtful awareness and action in the presence of others, to engage anew in mindful ways, to release others and ourselves from expectation, to reimagine *who we may become in each other’s presence*. To come to a moment of recognition, and be startled awake. Natality offers a reconsideration of the impossibility/possibility of belonging that is humankind, an opportunity to reclaim what has been lost, to contemplate what is, to reimagine ourselves

educators, human beings, we attend to the events, encounters, environments and relationships experienced in our lives. Through the practice of polished “fieldnotes” of reflective writing, we may come to new meaning-making and understanding. See Meyer 2006.

anew, to breathe deeply within the moments that stop us. As philosopher, Mordechai Gordon (2001) writes,

Natality 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)

Aoiki’s metymonic moments may be thus understood as performative and pedagogical action/sites of natality—requiring our mindful engagement, a calling for respect, compassion, reciprocity. Embraced within the action-site of natality is vulnerability, belonging, compassion, responsibility, imagination. Yet, here, too, within metymonic moments of encounter, is possible complicity and betrayal.

And it is at this moment, that I stop and pull my thesis from the bookshelf that stands behind my computer. I have just recalled another moment in my doctoral defence in which Dr. Aoki questions me about my understanding of the Japanese scholar Yuasa’s concept of *shinshin*, or bodymind oneness.

“Yuasa translates the Japanese *shinshin*, as bodymind, with ‘body’ preceding mind,’ in order to avoid the dualism implied in the hyphenated ‘mind-body,’ (Fels & Stothers, 1996, p. 258-9).” I explain.

Ah, but shinshin also embraces the heart. Dr. Aoki gently calls my attention to the absence of heart in my interpretation. His wife, June, a generous artist, paints the Japanese characters of *shinshin* for me, a doubled gift which I insert into my thesis (1999, p. 45) and frame

for my office. How could I have forgotten? So many years ago, Dr. Aoki called me to the absence of heart in my understanding of bodymind oneness, and here, now, in this moment of writing, I am reminded again.

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly;

What is essential is invisible to the eye.

—de Saint-Exupery, 1982, p. 70

Maxine Greene (1978), advises that we must be wide-awake to if we are to attend to the moral responsibilities that are the challenges that scholars and educators encounter in their work, within those moments that trouble us. In the absence of heart and wide-awakeness, our work fails to engage us. We become weary. We become complicit. Or we may withdraw. Procrastination.

This awakening to the generative space of learning is the impossibility/possibility between, Aoki's pedagogy of metymonic moments, invites us to dwell in ambiguity, ambivalence and uncertainty, recognizing a vibrant action-site of learning and inquiry. And thus, we (re)turn again and again to love of our work, our lives, ourselves, in our relationships with each other. This is the lesson of my son's call.

We dwell in the presence/absence of each other

within the possibility/impossibility of love,

and in our actions of how we choose to do so,

we become who we are.

Sleepwalk through our lives, our work, our relationships with each other and we become lost. Our wide-awakeness is engaged through dwelling within Aoki's pedagogy of metymnomic

moments; reflectively dwelling in metonymic moments of possible/impossible calls us from the brink of losing ourselves, shakes us by the shoulders, and says, *be present to this moment, here, now.*

And this wide-awakeness to what matters is Dr. Aoki's gift to me, his invitation to contemplate the impossible, not as one half of a dichotomy, but to dwell within the space of the slash “/”, coupled with the offering of his wife's gift of art. He understood I would need to attend to the space in between, and be alert to the absence of heart, if I was to come to renewed understanding and welcome of my work and the why of who I am.

this too is possible/impossible⁶

I am waiting for my son's call.

In my driving him to work, we reach out to each other; he listens to the stories I tell, so that I might become present in the telling and he in the listening. And he tells his own, within the silences, driving critiques, and morse code of his tapping on my car window, as I listen in return. Our narratives and presence together interweave a delicate text of tenderness and belonging. This too is the possibility/impossibility of scholarship, the research of the body mind heart that is our inquiry. His call wakes me up. The intersection of procrastination and a tap at a car window awakens me.

As a scholar, I had lost my way. In returning to my work, I am reminded what matters: as, Dr. Aoki remind me, as scholars and educators, we are invited to dwell in the spaces of “ambiguity, ambivalence, and uncertainty,” and must learn to recognize such spaces as they are, vibrant action-sites of possibility/impossibility. Listening for my son's call, calling me again and

⁶ In my doctoral thesis, which conceptualizes and introduces performative inquiry, the phrase, *this too is possible* appears repeatedly. See Fels (1999).

again into presence, into action, awakened me to the cause of my procrastination, revealing an absence of heart, a hunger for belonging—a desire for reciprocal engagement that breathes love into being, *as we become present in the presence/absence of each other*.

Through this writing, I navigate my way to heart; so that now, leaping out of bed first thing in the morning—so that I might attend to my work, with love, with renewal, with hope—is no longer impossible but a matter of pedagogical desire, in the dawning of my awakening.

“Hey, Mom! What are your plans today?”

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