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Once More It Is Time To Begin

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My grandparents, who lived through a revolution—the Russian Revolution, would find it very strange to learn that their granddaughter would be asked to speak about living the revolution. Images of revolution were seared into the memories of my youth through the stories my grandparents told me. Stories of terror, rape and murder as the Red-White military clashes moved back and forth through their village and their homes. Stories of my grandmother huddled under the kitchen table and watching in horror as the soldiers raped her sisters. "How fortunate we all were," she said. "We were not also killed like the girls next door."

My grandfather tells of being awakened in the middle of the night by his father to saddle the horse and ride to the neighbouring village to warn the people there, only to return to find his father, my great grandfather, bleeding to death. The soldiers had shot off his chin. By sacrificing himself, he had saved my grandfather.

This past summer, Pat and I had the glorious opportunity to visit St. Petersburg, a city that figured prominently in my grandfather's stories. As we toured past the Equestrian Hall, the cathedrals, the palaces, stories came alive. I will never forget standing in the

square of the Winter Palace. It was here on the morning of Sunday, January 9, 1905, thousands of striking workers, including their wives and children, marched into the square to present a petition for relief to Nicholas II. They were met by soldiers who began firing on the crowd almost immediately, killing hundreds (my grandfather says, thousands) of the demonstrators. The day was known as "Bloody Sunday," the catastrophe that initiated the beginning of the Russian Revolution.

So is this what we are living in education? Are we really living a *revolution*?

When my grandparents spoke of the revolution, there was no doubt in my mind what they were talking about. I knew the stories. I understood how ordinary people were impacted by the extraordinary events of the time.

As I consider living *the* revolution, as it pertains to education, I have to find a different definition of revolution. It would be very strange, and completely inaccurate, to cling to the impression that education is undergoing, or in need of a revolution if our only images of revolution are tied to war with its ensuing violence as power structures are realigned. Fortunately, this is not the only way for us to understand revolution.

Revolutions with their unfocused yet early symptoms expressed through general dissatisfaction, widespread malaise and contempt with those in power, belong to the modern age Hannah Arendt contends, and arise when the "idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning coincide" (Arendt, 1963,65, p. 29).

If I reflect on my experiences as a teacher, looking at those places that have undergone bold and significant changes, what would I include? If I am living it, it would help if I knew what *it* was. Where is the general dissatisfaction, the widespread malaise and contempt? Where are ideas of freedom and the experience of a new beginning? What are the mechanisms in the institution of education that keep undoing revolutionary energy?

Let's ask these questions more specifically. Are we, the teachers, free to consult what we truly know, and free to select the projects by means of which we define ourselves? Or are we still compelled or lured to remain passive receivers of discrete parts of a curriculum (Greene, 2001)? Are students, the learners—free to be inventors of their own theories, critics of other people's ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on this most complex world (Meier, 1999)? How are their experiences of school different in deep and significant ways? Finally, what actually happens to those teachers and students in education who in fact display revolutionary energy? As is often the case, the institution is powerful enough to define such energies negatively, even in those cases where "innovation" is promised.

Could it be that we are not yet living the revolution? Perhaps all the general dissatisfaction, general malaise and contempt for those in power are our signal that something needs to change. For now, we are poised like the Greek god Janus, between the new and the old—our two faces looking in opposite directions at the same time. One face looks forwards into an uncertain future, a future that we know

we must embrace if we are to educate the children for their future, while the other face gazes backwards to the comforts of the familiar, to our past.

This is certainly experienced by many as a place of feeling frozen, incapable, uninformed: immobilized—looking forward, looking backwards while general unfocused complaints about the current state of education moil about us—some teachers long for calmer, more certain, more predictable times. Others, such as Hannah Arendt, suggest that this feeling of being caught ‘in between’ is of the essence of education itself:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from the ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance to undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world” (Arendt, 1968, p.196).

Caught between the predictable and the possible, the past and the future, we live the present and in that living we make our choice. Do we cling to the comfort and predictable offered by the status quo, the past, with its power of tradition—a tradition that doesn't need to justify itself? Or do we do choose a new path—one that does not abandon the tradition, does not expel our children from our world leaving them to their own devices, but from it gains insight and wisdom to inform what needs to be created anew? Is it possible to release the shadow side of habit to which many cling in order to learn what it might require of us to develop a deep living commitment to "love the world", "to assume responsibility for it", "to [not] strike from their hands their chance to undertaking something new?" If we choose this new path, an interesting thing occurs: the arrival of the young in our classrooms is no longer a PROBLEM we have to deal with. The young become necessary and central and needed for this new path. Many of the resistances to revolution that are built into the institution of schooling end up treating the arrival of the young pathologically: as something that needs to be fixed, stopped. . .THEY need to be turned around, not school, THEY need to change, not us. The institution remains a given and anything that resists it is in deep trouble, students and teachers alike. If you take up this new path, you can't pretend that everyone will say "thanks very much."

I cannot speak of living this work, this choice, without also telling you that should you choose to live here also you will need fellow travelers. When you are trying to do things in new ways you can't do the work by yourself. It is one of the habits you will have to give up. Maxine Greene (2001) speaks of the necessity of becoming a friend

to someone else's mind. Toni Morrison's character in *Beloved* says, "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me all in the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind" (Morrison, 1988, 272-273).

When you come together in the "hope of school renewal and reform, [you know] there is always the danger of estrangement, like the feeling of standing in a crowded street with no one to speak to, no one who knows your name" (Greene, 2000, p.164). The choice you make to live out the commitment to create anew, to challenge the status quo, requires that you search for fellow travelers—those who also want to take this up in a principled way, those who are willing to entertain what such living might mean, what it means to be a friend, a steward, of someone's mind and to be accountable for what is created together.

This means that schools ought to be about developing everyone's talents and gifts (for who among us comes gift-less to school?). A good teacher respects and cultivates the dispositions that all children bring with them when they first walk through our doors: imagination, curiosity, persistence, and the drive to know how the world works. Good teachers respect and cultivate the ability of all children to think—with their words, their drawings, their bodies, their hearts. Good teaching helps children and youth engage with, and understand, difficult matters. A good teacher helps students uncover things that have been hidden,

and brings to life brand new questions, ideas and abilities. A good teacher makes school an intellectually exciting place to be, a place where learning is fun even when it is hard, perhaps especially when it is hard, and frustrating, and challenging. There is a passion and generosity about good teaching that drives fine teachers to extend the very best of themselves in the service of learning. And schools, as institutions, should be charged with stewardship that comprehends the need for humans to take pleasure in their work and to care for the human artifact. Stewardship also comprehends care for generations past and generations to come. This sort of stewardship is a commitment due students from teachers, children from parents, and the world at large from the people within it (Howley, Howley and Pendarvis, 1995, p. 185).

(Clifford and Friesen, 2001)

"To become responsible for the world means to care for the conditions under which it might now be set right anew—one condition of which is caring for children, for they are one of the irrevocable conditions of renewal" (Jardine, 2000, p.143). We know that we, the teachers, are the ones who are charged to be "open to mystery, open to the wonder, open to the questions, [we are the ones] who can light the slow fuse of possibility even for the defeated ones, the bored ones, the deserted ones. There is room for them; we can make room for them in our community" (Greene, 2001, p.146). The children, the ones who wear the scars, inform us about what needs to

change, how our practice must change to be open to mystery, open to the wonder, open to the questions. They are the ones who help us understand what school committed to the stewardship of the mind should be about. The defeat, distraction, boredom and desertion are not problems these children have but rather being defeated, bored and deserted tell us of the pain inflicted by our current schooling practices.

When you see the scars you know that there is a wound that has not been cared for and there is a story. Finding a way to embrace the stories of those on the margins, teachers and children alike, without becoming defensive is our challenge.

If we are going to accept the responsibility of educating children for their future, we also have to accept that fact that there is no part of our world today that is untouched by digital technologies. They have become a vital component of how we think and what we are able to think about. They have changed how we organize and present our work, and how we communicate with one another. Technology is not a passing fad. It is not another thing to add to the usual ways we think and work. It is not just one more curriculum topic to cover, or one more thing for students to do when their “real” work is done. It is an integral part of our everyday world.

Our new technologies should never be about pouring old wine into new bottles. They are not the tools we should use to accelerate the boredom, increase the desertion, or

remediate the defeated. If we lack the imagination and will to rethink schooling we should not, I believe, waste our money and time on these powerful technologies. However, if we are deeply obligated to educating rather than training because we have a deep moral obligation to freedom and democracy as well as an obligation to craftsmanship, style in mind, and to creating a space of excellence then we also understand that students must be given the opportunity to think in compelling ways each time they pick up a digital tool. How can they use technology to think? In a general sense, technology allows students to do things at a level of complexity and sophistication impossible without a computer. It permits them to move with ease and confidence in real and virtual worlds where things change. It allows them to create, not simply consume and reproduce knowledge. In somewhat more detail, here are some of the ways in which teachers could be working with digital tools and in digital environments.

People in the world outside schools are telling teachers how important it is that students learn how to work in teams both to pose and to solve problems in ill-defined environments. And of course, that is not what school has traditionally been charged to do at all. Traditionally, we have been required to transmit information and identify information leakage through tests and assignments. Curriculum guides, textbooks and the teacher worksheets have generally set problems, and good students learn to master the information and algorithms needed to find correct answers. Faced with communications technologies that put masses of information at the fingertips of even the most inexperienced, schools must come to terms yet again with the bald fact that

we can no longer be in the business of controlling and dispensing information from one isolated individual to another. The same good teachers who understand the power of the imagination have always known, too, that meaning is created in dialogue. When people talk, debate, defend, argue, prove, and play with ideas together, they create new understandings. We can do that face-to-face, and now we can use both synchronous and asynchronous communications to extend that way of working across time and space. People can share documents they have created by themselves. They can edit, make notes, and send attachments back and forth. They can publish findings instantly, contribute to global data banks, gain access to world class libraries and museums, and view and download remote data. But the new technologies permit even more than that. They allow people to collaborate in real time in common working environments, share one another's desktops, set up on-line meetings, and teleconference from multiple locations.

Imagine, then, schools in which students are regularly asked and assisted to

- explore complex and changing relationships
- bring multiple perspectives to bear on meaningful problems
- open communication and information channels to peers and to experts
- draw upon dynamic and rich data sets
- publish their own work to contribute to the knowledge of the world
- play with ideas
- design and construct things

- control their learning environment

We think that's the kind of school that comes much closer to nurturing the active life of active minds. And that's what we think technology is good for. If we are to truly know where the next steps are we must be fully alive and aware for we know that we are hardly in a position to develop a heightened sensitivity in others if we ourselves do not know what it is like to live inside. Living inside shows us what we need to create anew, what it might mean when the idea of freedom and the experience of a new beginning coincide. Living inside we can make the world of our dreams for our children, but since it's a world without walls, it will have to be a home for all our children.

“Once upon a time there was an old woman, Blind but wise.” Or was it an old man? A guru, perhaps. Or a *griot* soothing restless children. I have heard this story, or one exactly like it, in the lore of several cultures.

“Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind. Wise.

In the version I know the woman is the daughter of slaves, black, American, and live alone in a small house outside of town. Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question.

Among her people she is both the law and its transgression. The honor she is paid and the awe in which she is held reach beyond her neighbourhood to

places far away; to the city where the intelligence of rural prophets is the source of much amusement.

One day the woman is visited by some young people who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness. They stand before her, and one of them says,

“Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead.”

She does not answer, and the question is repeated. “Is the bird I am holding living or dead?”

Still she does not answer. She is blind and cannot see her visitors, let alone what is in their hands. She does not know their color, gender or homeland. She only knows their motive.

The old woman’s silence is so long, the young people have trouble holding their laughter.

Finally she speaks, and her voice is soft but stern. "I don't know," she says. "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands."

Her answer can be taken to mean: if it is dead, you have either found it that way or you have killed it. If it is alive, you can still kill it. Whether it is to stay alive is your decision. Whatever the case, it is your responsibility.

The revolution in education has not yet begun. We are caught in the swirling mire of discontent, dissatisfaction, and malaise. And because we are in such early days choosing to act is fraught with danger. The choice is not easy. Your words are never going to be adequate, but if you choose to live *this* revolution you have to try and you have to tell the stories. And in that living you will also know that all of this might come to naught, things might not change, schools might not change, but you have to try. It is in our hands. Once more it is time to begin.

Thank you.

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