

*Art and Science,  
Listening  
to and through  
Language*

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I would like to discuss a way to let C. P. Snow's two cultures blur cheerfully that students and I have been codiscovering. It happens at the University of North Texas in a course that is called Linguistics 5590: *Linguistics and Literature*. It's an English Department course; most of the students who come know a lot more literature than I do, and have a dusting of linguistics, just enough to make them suspicious of the technicality of it. How could anything so desiccated have any relevance to understanding someone like Shakespeare or Dickinson or Levertov?

Fair question. I tell them that we are going to hang out with pieces of language, from any author, any century, any continent, and any genre. The only criterion is this: any piece of language that we look at we do because it matters to someone in the room. Someone there loves it, is moved by it. Wants to understand it more deeply, or maybe: wants to rip it to shreds to see how in the world the writer put it together in such a luminous way.

Our colistening starts with someone reading the piece aloud. Verbal art is (usually) a choreography for the throat – the sound of the syllables is at the very center of the aesthetics of the word. After listening to the music of the text, we sit in a circle, and practice the art of *noticing*. The noticings may have to do with some aspect of meaning – with the feeling that the text calls forth in us – or with some aspect of structure – patterns of sound (like rhyme, alliteration, and so forth), or of the structure of words, or clauses, or with tropes, such as metaphor or metonymy, which strike our eye/ear/mind as we read and reread the poem. Some of us will be familiar with the poem already, and they may come armed with some noticings to prime the pump with, but that is definitely not always the case. I have been involved in this kind of class for about 30 years now, and many of the texts that come to class are ones that I bring – but that gives me a lot less of a headstart than might be expected. For the reason that I bring a poem to class is not primarily to make a point with it – rather, I come with it because it has stunned me, and I want to share this thing of beauty with others. Many times it has happened that all of us will sit and marvel at a poem that someone has brought in, and be absolutely unable to understand how the writer has wrought the magic. The poem simply will stay with us, shining in our minds, a bit like a wondrous flower that we come upon deep in the woods, far away from any path, perhaps seen before by no one, ever.

Another side of that same coin is that very often, despite my decades of experience in trying to become a better noticer, there is often someone in the class, perhaps a poet themselves, who is just light years ahead of me. And as Kierkegaard says, real education starts when the teacher learns from the student.

I follow the lead of *Freedom to Learn*, by the late psychologist/educator Carl Rogers, in his belief that just as he could not teach anyone how to teach, so I believe that I cannot teach someone to love language, and to find deeper meanings in literature. Rather, I hold that each person's encounter with the magic that words can bring is necessarily a private, and a sacred, one. It may strike the reader as strange to find words like "sacred" in the context of education; I feel that I have been incredibly fortunate to find that thinkers like Parker Palmer are way ahead of me in this respect. Some of his papers that have had the strongest impact on me appear in the bibliography.

There is little that is "required" of those who sit in our circle. Rather, each of us comes to realize that the more they can be open with, and trust, and respect, each other, the greater will be the chance that they will be able to be a part of a kind of collective being that such classes can sometimes jell into. The people in the room get to be friends with each other, come to appreciate the insights that have come from various quarters of the room, and to be thankful that the others have sometimes shyly brought pieces of language which have a profound significance in their own lives, and have passed on this significance to others.

And the shared experience of being a part of something as fragile, as unsummonable, as mystical, as this collective being, or superindividual, or perhaps simply this community – this has a validity that cannot be mistaken, one which is hard to describe, to get a handle on, but which is not

soon forgotten. There is a joy to this experience, an excitement, a feeling of reconnection, akin to what Nietzsche describes:

Philosophical thinking is...far less a discovery than a recognition,  
a remembering, a return, and a homecoming to a remote, primordial,  
and inclusive household of the soul.

*Beyond Good and Evil*

This experience has a lot in common with such others as these: being on a great athletic or research team, or playing or singing in an inspired musical group, or being in love, or being a part of a happy and deep family. The “class” seems officially to be about the love of the art and patterns of (literary) language, but many of us who have had the experience of soaring in this collective way soon realize that this initial setting of the stage is irrelevant. I have found, in asking the members of the classes in which some degree of this jelling has occurred, that some students have had this kind of magical educational experience previously, in the most diverse of contexts – perhaps in a graduate seminar, or a class on lifesaving, or Italian. But far too few raise their hands when I ask them who has been in such a learning community before.

It is my contention that the true goal of all educational systems should be the (re)discovery of what the Nobel laureate physicist Richard Feynman called “the pleasure of finding things out.” If a teacher (i. e., a fellow student) can help someone else to see that this is what education *can* be, that person will have received a permanent gift. Once someone has tasted of the joy of discovery, they are hooked. It is a bit as if they have found a wonderful beach or mountain which they can always return to, which will always recharge, reenergize them.

We ask ourselves: why does this happen so rarely? Can it be facilitated? What gets in the way of the birth of such a collective? How can we together move towards coinventing an educational system in which such joy, excitement, trust, and yes: love – is the norm, not a rare exception?

I can claim no particular credit for these ideas; what I propose is to lead a workshop of 60 (or preferably 90) minutes in which I will attempt to give the participants a taste of what such a collective mind is like being a facet of. I have tried before, extremely unsuccessfully, to talk about such matters theoretically, in the absence of the fundamental ingredient, which is: the fascination with a text whose author has propelled it, somehow, into orbit. A class like this marches on examples.

So I would bring to Hawaii some texts that seem to generally have a powerful impact on their readers. For instance, a poem like this one, which was given to me by a friend.

*Chase Scenes*

He's been after me  
 For years now.  
 Once when I was a boy  
 Sliding down the riverbank  
 He got one hand around my ankle.  
 While muddy water lapped and surged  
 I scrambled along a gnarled root  
 And hauled myself to the upper bank  
 Trembling with terror.

Just a trial balloon," he said cheerfully,  
 Lighting a cigar.

So many other times, mountain climbing  
 And ready to take the wrong step  
 Or lazing in the milky foam of Pacific Ocean surf  
 Or driving fast at four A.M. ready to fall asleep  
 And smash against some anonymous  
 Freeway wall.

And then the tests he puts you through:  
 The scans and probes and liquids measured  
 For cancer's black sand, for the leaking  
 Glue of inflammation; the number of times  
 He taps you for another round  
 Of dodge ball, firing one disease after another  
 Past your ahead as you dance  
 And jump, still alive.

Michael Shorb

*The Sun*

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(a magazine it would be hard to be more consistently more wonderful than)

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A present from Elizabeth DiFranco

I know next to nothing about this poem; whether this one would be one I would bring to Hawaii or whether it would be some other one is of little importance. I would bring copies of enough texts so that we might have the great good fortune of finding one which quickened interest, awoke insight, with one or more of us in the room, so that perhaps, maybe, just possibly . . .

Since this text, whose original purpose was to troll for acceptance at a huge conference in Hawaii, which it succeeded in, and where the five or so people who showed up, did, I think, begin to glide a bit, has come and gone, and since the text is now becoming part of a generic trolling – a description of what happens to those who stumble on 5590 in one way or another – I will add one love poem which Austin Hummell, a great teacher and poet-pal, gave to me, just so that the strangeness which exudes from each of the above words, and which has lured you into reading this far, will be complemented by a poem that I hope that you too will want to show to someone who you love as much as Bob Hicok loves whoever this one was written for.

*Other Lives and Dimensions and Finally a Love Poem*

My left hand will live longer than my right. The rivers  
of my palms tell me so.  
Never argue with rivers. Never expect your lives to finish  
at the same time. I think

praying, I think clapping is how hands mourn. I think  
staying up and waiting  
for paintings to sigh is science. In another dimension this  
is exactly what's happening,

it's what they write grants about: the chromodynamics  
of mournful Whistlers,  
the audible sorrow and beta decay of Old Battersea Bridge.  
I like the idea of different

theres and elsewhere, an Idaho known for bluegrass,  
a Bronx where people talk  
like violets smell. Perhaps I am somewhere patient, somehow  
kind, perhaps in the nook

of a cousin universe I've never defiled or betrayed  
anyone. Here I have  
two hands and they are vanishing, the hollow of your back  
to rest my cheek against,

your voice and little else but my assiduous fear to cherish.  
My hands are webbed  
like the wind-torn work of a spider, like they squeezed  
something in the womb

but couldn't hang on. One of those other worlds  
or a life I felt  
passing through mine, or the ocean inside my mother's belly  
she had to scream out.

Here when I say I never want to be without you,  
somewhere else I am saying  
I never want to be without you again. And when I touch you  
in each of the places we meet

in all of the lives we are, it's with hands that are dying  
and resurrected.

When I don't touch you it's a mistake in any life,  
in each place and forever.

Bob Hicok, *Plus Shipping*,  
Boa Editions, Rochester, NY (1988), pp. 98-99

It should have become clear that one of the key ingredients for this exploration is the dissolving of the boundary between teachers and students. Rather, everyone in the room becomes a *collearner*, to use a word which I will have to use until I find a better one. The goal of the workshop would be to explain collearning, to talk about the possibility of the emergence of a collective being, to ask pedagogical questions, and share experiences – but more than any of these typical academic activities, the real goal will be to fish for The Big One – a taste of a kind of thinking and discovering together that is permanently contagious.

John Seely Brown and Paul Seguid. The university in the digital age.  
[www.johnseelybrown.com/DigitalU.pdf](http://www.johnseelybrown.com/DigitalU.pdf)

Parker J. Palmer      The Grace of Great Things: Recovering the Sacred in Knowing, Teaching,  
and Learning  
<http://csf.Colorado.EDU/sine/transcripts/palmer.html>

—————      The Heart of a Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching  
<http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/events/afc99/articles.html>

Carl Rogers.      *Freedom to Learn*, Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company,  
Columbus, Ohio (1969).