

Phenomenology: A Personal Statement

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What is the experience of Philosophy for Children, of community of inquiry like? What does it feel like from the inside? How does it feel to the newly initiated, how does it feel to those with a long history? How does it feel to teacher and how does it feel to student? In this chapter, we will attempt to provide some partial answers to those questions based on our experience with Philosophy for Children. The assumption behind this chapter is that experience may be held to yield some truth, facilitate some understanding, that escapes theory. As usual, we are taking William James seriously.

I arrived in Berea, Kentucky, a day and a half after my departure from Rochester, New York. There were a series of delays caused by technical difficulties and the threat of snow and ice along the east coast. When the plane finally skidded to a stop in Lexington Airport, the weather forecast said that a layer of ice was expected to cover the city by nightfall. The student who met me told me that it would be impossible to drive the seventy miles to Berea that night. We would have to stay in her mother's home overnight, and when the weather cleared, make the drive. I remember trying to sleep on a too-small couch; I remember the sound of a mantel clock ticking throughout the night, sounding the hour and the half-hour; I remember wondering why I was there and what good would come out of this fiasco.

We made it to Berea by late afternoon, in not the best of spirits. The drive was grueling and treacherous, the student seemed unfamiliar with the road - the same gas station appeared and reappeared and my luggage was still travelling somewhere in the Midwest: it would arrive six days later. I checked into a motel, went to leave my things in my room, but then realized that I did not have any things with me, so I reluctantly got into the car and the student drove me to a classroom on the Berea College campus. The first sessions had already begun and I was late.

A tall, balding man was sitting at the end of a long rectangular table, talking. Matthew Lipman was speaking about the nature of Philosophy for Children, and where the idea came from, and what it was meant to do, and how Philosophy for Children was different from other programs. At his side was a younger woman, who seemed impatient with the procedure. At one point, she turned to him and

said, «Mat, you are acting just like a college professor; you are lecturing.» I don't remember what Lipman replied, but he did continue on, while the woman, Ann Sharp, rolled her eyes.

It was hard to figure out what was going on. I had read an article about Philosophy for Children by Fred Oscanyan in the journal *Teaching Philosophy*, and had seen a notice about a training session to be held in January 1979, conducted by Oscanyan, Matthew Lipman, and Ann Sharp. Oscanyan had focused on the formal logic in *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* and presented community of inquiry as a new, dialogical way of teaching logic. As a recent doctoral student at a very traditional university, one with a heavy concentration in philosophy of science and logic, I was intrigued by any program that even attempted to humanize the teaching of that often forbidding discipline. But here was this man, who looked like and sounded just like my former professors talking about the «spine» of Philosophy for Children, the logic, and in turn, giving a credible university-like lecture on the subject. There was something strange about that. I'm not sure if all the fifteen or so academics seated around the table felt that strangeness, but I was pretty sure that most of them did.

But then Lipman said that he was talking too much, and he suggested that we read from a new novel he had written called *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*. Lipman and his associates had been testing the novel in schools in New Jersey and New York, and by this time, Lipman had also gone on to create a sizable portion of the traditional corpus, with Lisa, Suki, *Mark*, and their respective manuals completed or just about to be completed. Still, there was an experimental quality to the way Lipman handled the instructions and began the reading. It was clear that he was still ready to be surprised, both by the novel itself, and the reactions of the participants to the novel. The facade of the expert, the veneer of the all-knowing university professor wore off as soon as Lipman became involved with *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*.

It was late afternoon. I was especially tired and cranky, and looking around the group, it felt like my feelings were not minority ones. Most of the people in the room were recent Ph.D.s in philosophy, most were people who had worked very hard to overcome the many obstacles that are placed in the path of doctoral candidates, and, as a consequence, had, perhaps, an inflated sense of their own worth. Now Lipman was telling them, telling us, that we would each read, aloud, a few paragraphs of *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, and that we would continue until we finished a chapter.

The reading was eventful. It disclosed something about the nature of reading itself. By the time one has been in school for twenty-five years, as most of us in the room had been, reading is largely taken for granted - it is assumed that the individual reader can sit down with a text and extract whatever meaning the text contains, especially if the text is written for eleven-year-olds and the readers are Ph.D.s in philosophy. What became apparent as the reading went public was that as Socrates might say, when people with great reputations are put to the test, sometimes those reputations are not completely deserved.

When we read, we did stumble over words, miss words altogether, sometimes changing a negative to positive thereby changing the meaning of a sentence, or read so quickly (or slowly) that meaning was

obliterated. What became apparent to me at that initial reading was that we were all capable of making very basic mechanical errors and, presumably, when that happened in private (silent) reading, the errors were likely to go unchecked.

The reading also disclosed something about the importance of voice, and by extension, the importance of perspective. I had read *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* before coming to Berea, liked the novel very much, and was struck by how much the narrator of *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* sounded like Chaim Potik of *The Chosen*, *Davita's Harp*, and *The Promise*. There was something about an urban, New York-like accent, both cultured and street-sophisticated that Lipman and Potik shared, something about the cadences of their sentences, that I was familiar with, that I grew up hearing. I found Lipman (and Potik) easy to read and appealing precisely because I heard their voices almost every day of my life, in the neighborhoods in which I grew up. If asked, prior to the public reading, given my familiarity with the voice, and given my familiarity with the philosophy and logic of the text, I would have said that I had a clear idea of what Lipman meant.

When I heard the text read with different voices, with a female voice, with a southern accent, with an Asian one, the text itself, became, alive in ways in which previously it had not. The changes in inflection enabled me to hear things that were previously obscured by my own assumption of familiarity with the text based on familiarity with voice.

Looking back, twenty years later, I would say that initial reading taught me something invaluable about community of inquiry: how the public nature of inquiry contributes to self-correction, and how perspective is crucial to meaning making and meaning discovery. At the time, however, I was just aware that something very interesting was taking place. Lipman and Sharp then functioned as a team, asking the group to think about what they had read and then formulate questions about what the group took to be problematic or questionable or interesting or philosophic. In theory, the request seemed straightforward, but the practice of our group showed the limitations of that theory. I would not want to say that we were prone to pontificate, but I only refrain from saying that because I was part of the group, and I prefer to refrain from being hard with myself. There was a good deal of theory building, and there was a good deal of endeavoring to get to the underlying structure, but we did find it difficult to get to the problematic. In effect, we fledgling experts were more concerned with dispelling the problematic than with, simply, exposing it.

After a time, Lipman and Sharp did get us to pose a few questions: future experience with other groups would show the paucity of those questions, but, at least, we had accomplished the task. Then, Lipman told us that we had set up an agenda, and that for the next few hours, possibly the next few days, we would try to answer the questions that we had raised.

I remember looking at a large clock that hung on the front wall of the classroom. The discussion did not go well. Indeed, I thought it was dreadful. It replicated every bad experience I had in classrooms, and I felt like the same fourth-grader who had sat in a classroom on Lincoln Road and Nostrand

Avenue, watching the hands of the clock making excruciatingly slow progress around a circle, while I only yearned for freedom. But, now there was no bewitching hour, because it looked as if Lipman and Sharp would go on forever. When it appeared, finally, as if they were wearing down, when it looked as if they were willing to give up on this noble, but apparently futile attempt at community building, when it seemed as if we would never stop posturing, Fred Oscanyan came into the room, was introduced, and Lipman and Sharp, their energy mysteriously restored, renewed their endeavors. The session ended after eleven o'clock. I drove back to the hotel, with three other participants, and we were all eagerly plotting ways to make our escape from this unbearable situation.

The following day started poorly. Another sheet of ice covered the street, auto traffic was impossible, so the word came down that the session would be delayed an hour. That would give us the opportunity to walk the two miles or so to the Berea campus. I had time to buy a toothbrush and toothpaste, and to make the first of a series of futile phone calls, trying to recover my wandering luggage.

The first session was inauspicious. Lipman, ignoring our agenda, carried on a conversation begun with one of the participants over a point regarding sentence conversion. That went on for almost half an hour, but then we returned to the agenda. For the rest of the morning, we replicated the misery of the previous evening.

Something happened, I still do not know what it was, or why it occurred, or even when it began, but sometime - let's say it was the middle of the third day - something very strange occurred. We, perhaps because we were becoming bored with our behavior, stopped acting as Ph.D.s and started to function the way I thought, but had never really envisioned, philosophers would act when they were doing philosophy. People were focused on a single topic, they were listening to each other, testing each other but also helping one another, building on one another's ideas, doggedly trying to figure whether Harry Stottlemeier has discovered a rule of logic, invented it, or possibly done something else.

What originally drew me to philosophy were the early Socratic dialogues. Without making too much of psychoanalytic explanation, there was something about the communal experience of doing philosophy, as Plato revealed it in the dialogues, that was attractive to a lonely, only child. When I pursued academic philosophy, I found that attraction irrelevant. Philosophy was private, was individual, and on those occasions when groups were involved, the interaction invariably was competitive. One did not work with the other; one tried to win an argument. The ideal of a group of friends or near friends, sitting down, trying to discover some truth or uncover some meaning was, in the context of academic philosophy, a naive, and romantic delusion.

I suppose, in retrospect, I could offer a number of good reasons explaining why I think Philosophy for Children is important. In fact, this book, in large part, is an attempt to do that. Still, what drew me to Philosophy for Children was not its educational benefits, was not its potential for instigating social and political reform, was not even its ability to contribute to what Dewey might call the ideal of democracy. The thing that attracted me on the third day of sessions at Berea was something more basic, more

experiential. Here was a place - a geographical place, a physical one, but also an intellectual and spiritual one - in which we could have the experience of doing philosophy. Marrienne Moore had praised poetry, although she disliked it, because it provided a place for the genuine. I felt a similar way about philosophy and now I had found that place. It was, quite simply, a wonderful feeling.

Of course, it did not last. Egos emerged, and with them, inevitable pettiness. There was gamesmanship, and bickering, along with the press to get things done, to expose people to as much of the curriculum as possible. In addition, Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan had to figure whom they wanted to encourage to continue with the program, and whom they wanted to encourage in other pursuits. There was, in effect, business to do, but still there were times, all too brief to be sure, tantalizingly so, when we were getting it right, when we were doing philosophy.

Ten days and the session was over. The weather had cleared, a midjanuary thaw, and people exchanged phone numbers and addresses, as we waited for the Berea bus that would take us to the airport, and then on to our destinations. By the time I got on the plane, the whole experience seemed so ephemeral as to qualify as a dream.

As part of our experience with the program, we were to do Philosophy for Children with children in our home city. A local university set me up with a group of eleventh-graders at a public high school, and then, through a series of clerical mix-ups, with a group of fourthgraders in a small, experimental school in one of the suburbs of Rochester.

As (bad) luck would have it, I started with the high school students. They had no desire to be in the program, indeed knew nothing about it, and when I tried to explain what we would do - read a story and then talk about it - their lack of interest, their outright hostility, was visceral. We finished the first session by getting through a reading of a page and a half of *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, and asking a few basic questions about the text. We had an agenda, but not much else. I met with the class every day, forty-five minutes a class. The classroom teacher was in the class with me at all times, and although she was not familiar with Philosophy for Children, she was in favor of any program that would give children the opportunity to think and would provide a way in which their ability to reason and to solve problems could be improved. The class members were all bright, intelligent students who were in the equivalent of an honors class in world literature. And I was enthusiastic about the subject, had some knowledge about philosophy and logic, was trained in I.A.P.C., methodologies, and was recommended by Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan. Finally, I was not all that different from the teenagers in the class. I was not that much older than them, had had similar educational experiences to them, and knew - or at least thought I knew - what they liked and what they found interesting. It seemed crystal clear to me that once they realized that they were being given the opportunity, in the classroom, to talk about things that interested them, they would value the program as much as I did.

The trick was to create an environment in which they could see what was crystal clear to me, in which they could have that wonderful experience of doing philosophy. I tried as hard as I could that

week, but the mechanics of the trick eluded me. By Friday, I was ready to write the Berea experience off as wonderful and inspiring, but, also, as unique, as nonreplicable.

The following week was spring break, so there were no sessions with the high school students. I went to the private, experimental school with little expectation that things would be better than they were with the high-school students. I was depressed by the earlier experience and was not comfortable with the fact that I would be using a novel, *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, that was intended for older students.

It is hard to describe the initial experience with that group of twelve ten-year-olds without lapsing into too many superlatives. I explained what we would do, and the children not only understood what I was talking about, they seemed to find it eminently reasonable. We read aloud the first chapter of *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, taking turns, handing a single copy from hand to hand. The reading was warm, expressive, and when the students stumbled on words, they were helped, gently, by the others. Notably, the classroom teacher refrained from any sort of intervention during the reading.

When I asked what they found most interesting or most problematic, one student said that she found Harry the most interesting, and another student said that he did, too, while a third student questioned why. Before I could do anything, before I could remind the children that we were trying to set up an agenda, the class was off on a discussion that burrowed through the character of Harry until it arrived at precisely the question that had motivated my group at Berea - was Harry a discoverer or an inventor or something else? I did manage to insert a few of the exercises from the teacher's manual on the distinctions between discovery and invention, but, for the most part, my presence was of little significance. I felt like an umpire at a well-played game - my task was more to admire than to enforce.

Not every class went like that. There were days when the children seemed cranky, or out-of-sorts, or just plain dull. There were days when the press of school business interrupted us, when plans for an assembly or fund-raiser took precedence over Philosophy for Children, but there continued to be days when the discussion was rich and fruitful, when it felt like we were actually doing philosophy. On a few of those days, too, I thought that I was becoming more of a member of the community, that I was helping in the doing of the philosophy.

I returned to the high-school group with renewed enthusiasm. While we never reached the art like quality of the private school dialogues, while we never achieved the apparent «natural» qualities of the private school group, we did seem to make progress. Although we never went much beyond the mechanical, we did begin to develop rules of etiquette and ethics that helped us to listen to one another and to explore one another's ideas. It was as if the high school experience presented a very distant, black-and-white, abstract view of community of inquiry, whereas the private school experience brought it (community of inquiry) closer, presented it in technicolor, and made it concrete.

Life goes on. I became involved with scores of communities of inquiry, as teacher and participant. Sometimes I was the novice, but other times I was viewed as the expert. I worked at Montclair and in

training sessions in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, dozen of times. I attended Philosophy for Children training sessions around the world, some lasting as long as an academic year, others covering barely a day. After a while those initial groups came, for me, to represent the twin poles of Philosophy for Children training - the group that had neither an idea nor feel for community of inquiry versus the group that understood community of inquiry deeply and organically. The task of the trainer, always, was to know which sort of group she/he was dealing with, and then find some way to help the group to make some progress - to help one group discover the craft or mechanics of dialogue while helping other groups become more artistic in their practice of the form.

That was a good lesson for me to learn, this notion of progress being tied to the type of group with which one is working. I think it helped me to become a better teacher, but the longer I was involved with Philosophy for Children, the more I trained and educated groups, the more I helped create and nurture communities of inquiry - here for three weeks, there for a semester - the more I became troubled by the transitory, the ephemeral nature of community of inquiry.

We had this ideal of a group of intelligent, well-intentioned people getting together to talk about matters of significance, of interest. As we approached the ideal in practice, as we approached the ideal of community of inquiry-, we discovered over and over again that we cared, deeply, about the topics; that we cared, deeply, about the procedures we adopted from inquiry into those topics; and that we cared, deeply, about our co-inquirers, about our friends in the process of inquiry.

And then, of course, the inevitable happened. The class would be over, the training session would end, this one would hop into a car and head back to Wisconsin, that one would leave in a taxi that would find its way to an airport, another would be last seen walking down a gravel walk in some suburban forest. How to say this, but the experience of community of inquiry always brought with it a sense of inauthenticity: we claimed to be doing important work, it felt, while we were doing it, like important work, but then a metaphorical bell tolled, and people just got up and left. It was as if community of inquiry was like a vacation, a respite that we treated ourselves with, indulged ourselves in, but when the real world beckoned, we packed our bags and were gone.

It seemed to me that we were always beginning things, and that even if those of us involved with Philosophy for Children did effect a significant change in public education, we would still be missing out on the really transforming possibilities of Philosophy for Children - the way that Philosophy for Children could change us, by providing a new way in which we could do philosophy. It was as if we were given the opportunity to choose between, literally, having a dialogue with Socrates and having a Socratic-like dialogue, and had chosen the latter. Nothing wrong with the choice we had made. Indeed, the choice likely would have all sorts of benefits. Still, the feeling persisted that if we would take this notion of community more seriously, if we did ignore metaphorical bells, if we kept the community going when training was over, we might, in effect get Socrates to speak.

It is interesting to look at old photographs of Philosophy for Children workshops from the 1970s and early 1980s. In this one Lipman and Sharp stand together squinting into an autumn sun. Fifteen

people with whom I have shared an intimate and grueling three weeks. Sessions begin at 8:00 a.m. and continue on to 10:00 or 11:00 p.m., seven days a week. Now, sitting in this chair, this office, eighteen years later, I can only remember three or four names.

In another photograph, Lipman stands at one end of a long line, but Sharp is nowhere to be found. The group is larger, and judging from the clothing, it is a very cold winter day. The photograph is taken in 1989 because at the far end of Lipman's view is the BBC producer who filmed the documentary that year. I remember her face, but not her name. If pushed, I could identify six of the thirty or so people appearing in the photograph. And yet, for a brief period of time we knew each other very well, cared about each other, depended on each other and considered ourselves a community of inquiry. In a certain sense, one feels like betrayer and person betrayed. «I thought we had established a certain bond. I thought that for more than three weeks I would continue to react to you and you to me. I thought that we had become friends in inquiry, but now I cannot even remember your name.»

But then one realizes that while there are people who do not stand out, there are also people who somehow persist beyond the end of the specific community, who consistently force themselves on consciousness. There are relationships that are formed within the community of inquiry that do not reflect the ethereal nature of the individual community of inquiry. We have become co-inquirers with the other, and the inquiry persists even when its specific community dishands.

Sometimes that happens quite literally. You go back to your home in Ohio and I to mine in Texas, but we correspond with one another, now a letter, now the telephone, now e-mail. We explore one of the interests we shared at that training session in Montclair, New Jersey. We meet at another training session, and expand our interest, and then we work on a paper together, do a presentation. The community of inquiry at Montclair was our starting point but when it ended, we became members of a smaller but more enduring community of inquiry, a community of, if you will, intellectual friends. We continue to talk with each other, and, agree, explicitly to do our inquiry together and in light of each other - I present my findings for your consideration and you do the same for me.

More frequently, however, things are far more nebulous than that. Our correspondence post-inquiry, might be sparse and infrequent. We lose each other in the press of our own lives, but every once in a while you reappear, force yourself into my consciousness. I hear you, my intellectual friend, begin to speak as I perform my own deliberation. «What should I believe? What is worthy of my belief? How should I act? How should I treat this person?» I hear your voice, recall snippets of argument patterns, remember how you would react in this situation, and you have become part of my deliberation. I am reacting to you as certainly as I did that cold winter morning in 1982.

I did not become involved in Philosophy for Children because I wanted to make friends, intellectual or otherwise, with people. That was not my goal and, I would argue, that should not be the goal of community of inquiry. The goal should have something to do with the uncovering of meaning and the discerning of truth. The effect, however, might be quite different.

Speaking simply from my own experience, those communities of inquiry that I have experienced in Germany, Australia, Brazil, Mexico, and the United States have become places where I have met people who have become for me what Edmund Wilson was for Scott Fitzgerald - an intellectual conscience. Consciously and sometimes not so consciously, I relate my behavior to them. Whether they know it or not, they have contributed to and continue to contribute to my intellectual and ethical development.

In the final chapter of this work, we will examine the relationship of friendship to community of inquiry, and try to move beyond the anecdotal to suggest that any program that did not have this as an outcome would be ignoble and unworthy of our attention. On the other hand, a system which typically generated such outcomes would have much to recommend it.

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