Pedagogical Openness

Sandra Wilde

Through a careful reading of experiential texts involving adults and children, the elusive experience of pedagogical openness begins to unveil. Because children come to us from beyond our adult concepts and limited understandings, pedagogy has the potential to break us open. As we openly face our moments with children, facing the difficulties and the truths being revealed, we are brought closer to the joy and mystery of life itself.

PEDAGOGICAL OPENNESS

How might responding to children in a manner conducive to «openness» support ethical pedagogical conduct? In the following hermeneutic inquiry, this question first arises in the context of a common parenting experience: being awoken at night by one's child. As this situation is read closely and interpreted in conversation with other texts, the elusive experience of pedagogical openness begins to show itself.

> *It has been a busy evening. Finally, now that the children are asleep, I can begin to write. But it's late; I'm already tired and I have so much to do. How will I finish my paper tonight? I shake off these thoughts and start my computer. Immersed in writing, hours pass without notice. I rub my burning eyes then glance at my watch. «I'll have to finish tomorrow», I tell myself, «when I have the energy». Once in bed I sigh, relieved to be resting at last. Sleep just comes...*
>
> *Then I hear crying. My baby is awake. I squeeze my eyes shut. No. This can't be happening! Not tonight! I can't do this tonight. I pause. Maybe if I just wait he'll go back to sleep. I wait some more.... The cries do not stop. No, they increase. This noise has got to stop! Half asleep, I go to my son and like a zombie I try to get him back to sleep. I offer him milk over and over and over, while my head pounds with the sound of my own thoughts: «Why won't you just drink your milk and go back to sleep? Why are you making this so hard? Why tonight? How will I finish my paper tomorrow without getting enough sleep tonight? Please go back to sleep! I'm so tired!»*

I look down at my son. His puffy *red eyes are pleading, begging for comfort. When 1 see this I get up and carry him. His crying body is heavy, tense, hard to bear. I hold him and walk.*

Hours have passed. I am no longer rushed to get him to sleep, no longer rushed to get sleep myself, no longer rushed to do anything. I feel a strange acceptance of everything. My son is breathing quietly and rhythmically now. He is asleep. My body is exhausted, yet this too is strangely OK.

OPENING TO PAIN

In this experience my state of exhaustion was, in a sense, beneficial. I was too tired to continue fighting the situation; the only choice left was to accept it. However, this was not a conscious choice. It just happened. And the next time I looked down at my son, l truly saw him. Without a thought, I simply held him. My son's crying body was tense, heavy and hard to bear. Yet there was no question, bearing him and my pain was the «right» thing to do.

Heidi Heckmann

The immediate response toward pain is to turn away, to put up protective walls around ourselves to shield us from hurt. Yet, when we become parents and teachers - guardians of children - is it not our pedagogic responsibility to face the difficulties and the disappointments that sometimes arise in our lives with children? In a paper titled, *Parental uncertainty as pain*, Raffel (1983) asks how parents should respond to pain if they are to be mature - that is, to act as adults in the adult/child relation. He suggests that an immature relation to pain is a self-expressive, self-comforting approach - a denial of the experience of pain as something from which the adult can learn. Raffel suggests that a mature parent does not turn away from the situation because it is painful; but rather tries to understand the situation.

I also wonder about teachers' pain. In particular, I wonder about moments when children are called «pains». What is

happening when we attach such labels to children? It appears that when a child is given the label *problem,* the dynamics of the pedagogic relationship are reduced to problem solving measures and attempts to «fix» the child. However, what if the child is not simply in need of fixing? What if the situation is more complex, implicating the entire school community, (including the teacher), implicating the child's family and the web of social and cultural relationships, which shape it? And are we not, by calling a child a *pain,* removing ourselves from the realm of difficulty - locating the «problem» completely outside of ourselves? By doing so, to what extent are we denying our own difficulty and frustration in the situation? There may be no disputing the fact that a particular child, well known in the school for her demanding behavior, is troubled. Yet is it not our pedagogic responsibility to openly face the perceived difficulty and bear it as our own, as well?

Despite my state of physical exhaustion, taking up the perceived difficulty seemed right. I was overcome by a strange acceptance of everything. Thinking back to that moment I realize something: I was in exactly the right place, in the right time, doing the right thing - despite the difficulty of it all! Also, the experience was deeply satisfying. Perhaps now, I have a sense of what is meant by the saying, «suffering and joy have the same root» (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997, p. 37).

> *Knowing how to suffer is knowing how to have joy in suffering.... Elle va bien tomber. Which has a double meaning, at least: she will fall well. it will be good, right, just at the right moment. But also: she will end up falling, the fall will be inevitable.* (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997, p. 37)

The fall will be inevitable. These words sound unusual amidst our countless strategic attempts to avoid the fall; they strangely suggest that suffering might be good, it might be «just at the right moment.»

OPENING TO THE MOMENT

Don't chase after the past,

Don't seek the future;

The past is gone

The future hasn't come

But see clearly on the spot...

(The Buddha, in Mangalo, 1993, pp. 132, 133)

When I looked down at my son, he was fully *present* in my experience. I was simply with him *as he was* in the moment. I no longer felt rushed to make him into something else; I no longer felt rushed to be anywhere else or to do anything else. I was overcome by a feeling of acceptance - a kind of openness to the moment. Helene Cixous, who stresses the importance of living in the present, says something that sounds strange, yet it rings true in relation to my experience:

> *[When one lives in the present] one sees that it [time] is not what goes by but what stays, what opens itself. All this is not easy. By definition, we do not have a gift for the present.* (In Cixous & Calle-Gruber, *1997, p. 35)*

At times we may find it difficult to openly face our moments with children. Have we lost this gift for the present?

> *I can recall instances* of *parenting when the children and myself were tired and cranky, when my first impulse was to run from the situation. Sometimes I would desperately pack the children into the car and set off to* fill *our time with something distracting, like a trip to the zoo. Sometimes, this seemed to work. But if I was running from what really was needed, we would just end up cranky and overtired at the zoo and things would only get worse. Maybe I unknowingly hoped that the zoo activity would take care of them so that I would not have to do the work. (A* parent)

This example sounds familiar. I can recall times when I too have often felt inclined to fill up time with distracting activity. The word «distract» comes from the Latin *distrahere,* which means to drag or draw away from *here,* from *this.* While our children may call to us in many ways to be *here* with them, we may resist facing their appeals. Could it be that the inclination toward distraction is fueled by a tendency to avoid the challenge of the moment?

As a teacher, I sometimes felt compelled to fill-up my students' time with one activity after another - to keep them busy. Very often I felt as though I had *no choice* but to keep them busy. In addition to our inclination toward distraction in times of difficulty, we seem to be drawn to distraction by the apparent demands of our day. Perhaps,

> *... everything conspires so that we do not manage to live in the present: It is Sunday and we think of Friday. The worries which are the masters of most people prevent them from ever being in the present. Instead, they are in a menacing future, in a projection that destroys everything around them and beneath their feet; or in a rehashing of a baneful past.* (C[i]xous, in Cixous & Calle-Gruber, *1997, p. 33)*

Curriculum demands, report-card assessments, school-based initiatives - there always seems to be an excess of things to do. *As* teachers it is difficult to do just one thing without thinking about the many other things required of us. But how can we do any one thing well if we are in a state of perpetual distraction? What damage do we (adults) do to ourselves and everything around us, especially our children, when we avoid the present moment?

Yes, we may have lost the «gift for the present,» as Cixous says. But can we learn by watching a young child, whose playfulness expresses the presence of this gift? Is the child's «gift» recognizable in the following passage?

> *It seemed to Myop as she skipped lightly from hen house to pigpen to smokehouse that the days had never been as beautiful as these. The air held a keenness that made her nose twitch. The harvesting of the corn and cotton, peanuts and squash, made each day a golden surprise that caused excited little tremors to run up her jaws. Myop carried a short, knobby stick. She struck out at random at chickens she liked, and worked out the beat of a song on the fence around the pigpen. She felt light and good in the warm sun. She was ten, and nothing existed for her but her song, the stick clutched in her dark brown hand, and the tat-de-to-ta-ta of accompaniment.* (Walker, *1994, p. 582)*

Completely immersed in the moment, Myop's movements exude a sense of serenity and freedom. The «gift» expressed by children is in many different traditions considered a «higher» form of knowing. For instance Kennedy *(1992)* states,

> *As in Jung's thought, so in the Jesus sayings the «little child» represents an excluded form of knowledge. Not yet trapped in the separative individualism and stereotypic sedimentations of adulthood, the child represents the unity of knowledge and being, ... and thereby is an involuntary witness to the truths of nature and of spirit.... (F)or example, «Above the heavens is Your majesty chanted by the mouths of children, « or «He who is in harmony with the Tao is like a new born child». (p. 46)*

The child is a reminder of the possibility of living in the immediacy of the moment unencumbered by the «stereotypic sedimentations of adulthood»: the possibility of seeing clearly on the spot.

«[T]ime is not what goes by but what stays, what opens itself» (Cixous, in Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1994, p. 35). While walking with my son in my arms, the experience of feeling burdened lifted. I no longer felt constrained by demands to do this or that. I experienced a sense of freedom and openness, despite my state of physical exhaustion. I accepted the moment as it was. However, the sense of peaceful openness I experienced was not passive. The peace was enabling; it freed me to do what was necessary in that particular moment.

BEING OPEN TO «TRUTH»

Something happened that allowed me to see the situation with my son in a new light. What cleared away to allow a new understanding to emerge? I seemed to become open to understanding what the situation was asking of me. We might say that I heard the «truth» of the situation. By «truth» I am referring to a particular phenomenon - one that differs from our usual assumption that truth is singular, absolute, and unchanging. I am referring to an understanding of truth which Heidegger (1962) called *alethia,* a Greek word which means unconcealment. For Heidegger, truth is not a final, decontextualized phenomenon; it is an event which gives rise to understanding - the eventful experience of *opening.* The experience of truth, therefore, has to do with the opening up

of the possibility to understand. Truth is the moment of unconcealedness, when the depth and fullness of something is brought into the open. Because it is an event, the experience of truth is subject to the temporal nature of our existence - it comes and goes. Thus, «there is no privileged meaning or truth of Being but only the unfolding of many meanings and truths of Being across epochs - none of which can be privileged» (Caputo, 1993, p. 30).

In this sense, understanding has a particularity; it cannot be wrestled free from the moment.

> *When the call gives us a potentiality-for Being to understand, it does not give us one that is ideal and universal; it discloses it as that which has been currently individualized and which belongs to that particular Dasein [being-there].* (Heidegger, 1962, p. 326)

What might these words mean if we read them in relation to pedagogic practice? In the moment when I looked down at my son, the right action seemed to be walking with him in my arms. Would it be appropriate to conclude from this experience that every time my son wakes up at night crying, I should do the same? Such a conclusion seems to betray what was revealed that night. Should openness then, become a new recipe for pedagogic practice - the «latest» pedagogical technique? To apply openness in this way is to assume that «truth» can be willed and forced into being by individual effort alone. In order to hear the particular «truth» in one's experience, Heidegger suggests that we become available to the particular moment, available to that which is beyond the self.

Let us consider another very simple, common parenting experience. One day a fellow parent and I were discussing how rigid notions of good and bad parenting can actually get in the way of being a good parent. She shared an experience whereby the judgments of others (and herself) seemed to be suspended for a moment, allowing her the freedom to do what needed to be done.

> *My two-year-old daughter and I are passing through the checkout counter at our local super-market. She spots the gum and points to it. «No, not now, «I say. «We have to go out to the car». At this, she flings her body to the floor and starts to wail, «Yes. Gum!! Yes. Gum!!» I see the tellers and the other customers looking at us, waiting to see what I - a «bad» mom - will do with my misbehaving, «evil» child. When I see this, I am overcome by a sense of humour. My daughter looks ridiculous - but harmless - and so does everyone else, being drawn into her little tantrum. I just scoop her up while she continues to kick her legs and yell. She sees my mischievous smile and lets out a giggle. The little emergency floated by without scathing us.*

When my friend shared her experience, I recalled my own experience of feeling watched by others when my own child «misbehaved» in public. I wonder, how might my friend's experience have been different, if she would have been «drawn into» her daughter's tantrum? Could it be that the perception that a tantrum is always «bad» and «wrong» sets us (adults) up for failure? Does anyone know of a two-year old child who has never had a tantrum in a supermarket?

Static notions of right and wrong seem to shut down and limit the possibilities for ethical conduct in our lives with children. My friend seemed to be free of the kind of self-imposed limitations that restricted me when I first tried to get my son to sleep. She did not seem to be full of self-centered thoughts such as: «Do they think I'm a bad mom because I cannot control my daughter?» Or, «Why are you misbehaving again?» She also seemed to be momentarily free of the social and cultural prescriptions of good parenting. I do not mean to imply that social and cultural prescriptions are always «wrong». However, they may become problematic when they are no longer appropriate for the situation-at-hand.

My friend became momentarily aware of the usual prejudices surrounding the issue of child tantrums in public. Our prejudices, according to Gadamer (1989) are not just our own, they are historically situated. In terms of parenting, we assume the prejudices of our time, the general assumptions about what «good» parenting should look like. What harm do we do to our children under the guise of knowing what is best for them? In the book, *For Your Own Good,* Alice Miller (1983) examines the notion of a «good» upbringing, and describes how destructive pedagogic practices are assumed simply because *they were done to me and I became a decent person.* According to Miller (1983) individuals who adopt harmful pedagogic practices in this way,

> *are inevitably contributing to the continuation of cruelty in the world by this refusal to take their own childhood tragedies seriously. Taking over this attitude, their children, pupils, and students will in turn beat their own children, citing their parents, teachers, and professors as authorities.* (1983, p. x)

It is important to note the experience of blindly assuming behaviors simply because they are the «normal» response to particular situations involving children. For the sake of our children, we may need to cultivate a kind of discernment, which opens us more fully to the deeper call of the moment.

BEING RELEASED FROM THE CONSTRAINTS OF THE SELF

Before I looked down to see my son, my experience was self-contained: I did not allow the moment to address me; I tried to comfort my son out of concern for my own comfort; I tried to change the situation into something that would suit me better; and I tried to shield myself from the pain and difficulty of the experience. My experience was filled with the sound of my own thoughts - until I let them fall away. Was I too tired to carry the heaviness of my self-centeredness any longer? Did I recognize my son's need for comfort when his eyes met my own? I am not certain exactly how this shift happened, although I can be certain that it did.

When I reconsider that night with my son, a wonderful aspect of it was the experience of acceptance that I felt after hours of just holding him. Even when I noticed that he was asleep, I was in no hurry to lay him down. This feeling of peace seemed strange. Perhaps it contradicted everything my usual, logical mind would have me believe: «Are you *crazy? Just put him down and get to bed before morning comes!»* Fortunately in that moment, I was not plagued by such thoughts. I was free to be with my son and to eventually go back to bed - in peace.

This experience of release came back to my awareness not long ago as I was reading a short story, by Tillie Olsen (1994). The story was about a single mother and her children, living in the depression era. What I found most striking was what the mother learned: in the story she called it *wisdom.* Somehow, she learned the value of being released from the *tightness* of her own troubles so that she could be open to children. She learned the necessity of letting go of distracting burdens, cares and worries so that she could turn to her children «the face of joy» (p. 461).

I wonder about how living with children may provoke this kind of shift, this release from the burden of our «selves». Perhaps «by his very presence, a child brings us to our senses by asking what we have done in creating him, and what we are going to do now that he is among us» (Smith, 1984, p. 292).

OPENING TO THE OTHER

It's life which is greater than we think it is!

(Cixous, in Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997, p. 27)

Living with children has the potential to open us to the mystery of life. My child is not «knowable» in the same way that I can know how long the side my desk is. Behind the face of the child that is seen «lies the life unseen, the other side of the world's wholeness, the world yet to be revealed» (Smith, 1984, p. 288). It is in this way that my son constantly eludes my attempts to «pin down» or «fix» him in any way, calling me to face the limitations of my thinking. The encounter with the face of the Other, according to Levinas, is «the ultimate summons to validate the existence of another human being who cannot be totalized or recuperated into one's self' (Kearney & Rainwater, 1996, p. 123). Opening oneself to a child then, is becoming open to that which eternally eludes one's attempts to grasp.

I truly saw my son when I let go of self-centered concerns. Yet it was my son who invited me to let them fall away. Holding my son encouraged an embodied awareness of the situation, the kind of awareness that cannot simply be reached through reason and individual will. Parents have an opportunity to develop this subtle discriminative skill as they involve themselves in the care of their children. For instance, new parents quickly begin to hear the different meanings inherent in their child's cries. The crying child demanding candy in the supermarket requires a response that is different from the crying child who is in extreme pain. Perhaps becoming pedagogically «skilled» requires being open to the infinite possibilities always inherent in each new cry - and in each new encounter with children.

As teachers, we do not have the kind of physical nurturing relationship with our students that parents may have with their children. However, we may develop and enlarge our capacity to interpret and appreciate the living connections between our students and ourselves. I am reminded

of a situation that involved a Kindergarten teacher, named Dianne, and Brian, one of her most difficult students. Dianne described Brian as an aggressive boy who could not restrain himself from hitting and pushing the other children. Dianne tried many things to help Brian contain his aggression. She explained to him that she would not allow him to hurt other children nor would she allow them to hurt him. However, reasoning with him did not work. She put him in *time-outs* as a way to prevent further outbursts but this only seemed to aggravate the situation. One day Dianne watched as Brian, without provocation, pushed over the little girl standing next to him. At this, Dianne realized that Brian's problem was *beyond* Brian. She decided to move Brian's belongings away from the other children to prevent close physical contact, which seemed to help a little. She realized that while she may never be able to control Brian, she could try to understand him. So Dianne visited Brian and his parents in their home to discuss his difficulties. She returned from this visit with a deepened appreciation of Brian's situation. The exact word she used to describe Brian's father was *sadistic.* She had begun to understand Brian's angry and violent behavior.

When Dianne realized that Brian's problem was beyond him, she encountered Brian with ethical wonder. Her deepened appreciation of the child's life opened her to a more generative understanding of her relationship with him. Dianne experienced *compassion*, which means *to suffer with.* Sharing his suffering, she experienced the living connection between Brian and herself. In compassion, we experience the interrelation of self and other; we break through the illusion of self-containment. I, like Dianne, experienced a breakthrough when I arrived at my «wits end». «Dead» tired, I finally let go of my separate ego-centered intentions. Perhaps if Dianne had continued to locate the difficulty «out there» she could have simply applied this technique or that, without risking herself at all. In doing so, only her methods would have been present - in a sense, she would have been absent. This kind of *severance* would have only contributed to the violence in Brian's life.

Brian reminds me of another young boy; the child is fictional but his story is sadly too real. This boy's life is even more tragic than Brian's because in his entire life he is never met with genuine openness by a caregiver. The boy is mentally disabled, he is shuffled from place to place, from home to institution, to places that «smell of those who wanted something from him» (Gustafsson, 1986, p. 94). His reality is passed over somehow. His difference is met with fearful yet sincere attempts to care for him. He is beaten as a means to *keep him from harm:*

> *After he'd been home a week, he almost drowned in a brook when he went too far out on the crumbling edge of the ice close to the waterfall. He got a good hiding. It was his brother who pulled him out. One of his red boots stuck in the mud. His brother poked around for it for quite some time, while the boy stood there shivering. He cried, for he knew the worst was yet to come. The water still stung in his nose; water you inhale deeply has a strange way of stinging.... His nose was* running, *he shook with cold, his thin overalls smelled damp and putrid from the brook water. He stood quite still, freezing, and someone somewhere owed him infinite love.* (Gustafsson, 1986, p. 97)

If it is true that we come to know ourselves through our experiences with others, what do our experiences with children teach us about ourselves? Perhaps our children may help us to face the world with the kind of radical openness that they - the very young - embody. And perhaps,

> *someday we will regard our children not as creatures to manipulate or to change but rather as messengers from a world we once deeply knew..., who can reveal to us.. . the true secrets of life....* (Miller, 1989, p. xi)

REFERENCES

Caputo, J. *(1987). Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, deconstruction and the hermeneutic project.* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Cixous, H. & Calle-Gruber, M. *(1997). Helene Cixous rootprints: Memory and life writing.* London, UK: Routledge.

Gadamer, H. G. *(1989). Truth and Method.* New York, NY: Continuum Books.

Gustafsson, L. *(1986).* Greatness strikes where it pleases (Y. Sandstroem & J. Weinstock, Trans.). In *Stories of happy people. (pp. 91-103).* New York, NY: New Directions.

Heidegger, *M. (1962). Being and time.* New York, NY: Harper and Row.

Kearney, R. & Rainwater, *M. (1996). The continental philosophy reader.* London, U.K.: Routledge.

Kennedy, D. *(1992).* The hermeneutics of childhood. *Philosophy Today, 1992,* Spring, *44-58.*

Mangalo, B. *(1993).* The practice of recollection. In Bercholz, & Chodgrin (Eds.), *Entering the stream (pp. 130-140).* Boston. MA: Shambhala Press.

Miller, A. *(1983). For your own good. Hidden cruelty in child-rearing and the roots* of *violence.* New York, NY: Farrar Straus Giroux.

Olsen, T. *(1994). I* stand here ironing. In Hanson, & Shepard (Eds.), *You've got to read this: Contemporary writers introduce the stories that held them in awe (pp. 460-466).* New York, NY: Harper Perennial. Raffel, S. *(1983).* Parental uncertainty as pain: A reading of Dr. Spock. *Phenomenology + pedagogy, 1(3), 335-348*

Smith, D. *(1984).* Living with children. *Phenomenology + Pedagogy, 2(3), 287-292*

Walker, A. *(1994).* The flowers. In Hanson, & Shepard (Eds.), *You've got to read this: Contemporary American writers introduce the stories that held them in awe*

(pp. 582-583). New York, NY: Harper Perennial.

Address correspondence to:

Sandra Wilde

University of Alberta

Edmonton, Alberta Canada T6G 2G5

e-mail: smwilde@telusplanet.net

Back to current electronic table of contents