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Meditations on Contemplative Pedagogy as Sanctuary¹

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Composed as a collection of interrelated meditations, this paper contemplates what it might mean to invoke a word like “contemplative” in relation to pedagogy.

Keywords: contemplative pedagogy, sanctuary, kairos time

1

Western educational institutions are characterized by the ways they operate (consciously or unconsciously) by the culturally inherited logic and rules of *chronos*—chronological time. Eco-feminist theologian Catherine Keller (1996) names this violent timeline an unwinding “death-line” (p. 137). It is the time of erasing the present in favor of a mythical future that never arrives (“progress”). It is the time of colonization, of the market, of extinction, of war, and of fragmentation. It separates humans from our own bodies, from one another, from other species, from the fragile and finite earth which sustains life. It enables and legitimates the continued perpetration of unspeakable ecological, economic, and cultural violence. In educational institutions chronological time is often individually experienced as the suffering of interminable rushing, competition, fear, and lonely individualism.

2

Meditating on the meaning of invoking the words *contemplate* or *contemplative* in relation to schools, curriculum, and pedagogy reveals a spacious opening in language that might offer us some healing time, space, and rest from this rushing, distracting, and violent timeline.

¹ For the seeds of this paper, I am grateful to my colleague and friend Dr. Sandra Wilde with whom I first explored the interpretation of contemplation as “temple” and “sanctuary” through many generative conversations and in conference presentations at the ACMHE 2010 conference in Amherst, MA, and at the CACS 2010 pre-conference in Montreal.

3

Etymologically, *contemplate* derives from Latin *contemplari*, meaning “to gaze attentively” (> Latin. *con*, “with” + *templum*, temple). A *temple* is defined as space marked out for “observation,” a “consecrated space,” a “sanctuary,” or a “sacred space” (ODEE, 1966, p. 908). Because they are not normally used in relation to the inherited institutions of secular, industrial society, words like *sanctuary* and *temple* have the potential to disrupt or deconstruct common images of school and pedagogy. To speak such words, then, in relation to pedagogy, curriculum, and schooling at all levels might summon forth a new kind of responsibility to this language.

4

What are pedagogical obligations to *these* images?

Contemplate.

Temple.

Sacred spaces.

Sanctuary.

5

What kind of space and time does pedagogy imagined as sanctuary open for us as teachers and learners? Pedagogy imagined as sanctuary might be characterized by the active and ethical creation of sacred space. Pedagogy imagined as sanctuary calls for the courageous resistance of ways of living, being together, and educating that engage in or promote social, ecological, cultural, and economic violence. Pedagogy imagined as sanctuary creates an active and mindful practice: awe and reverence for life itself. Pedagogy imagined as sanctuary enables us to recognize illusions and false promises, drawing our gaze away from the forces of shallowness and disembodiment and towards awareness of senses, existential experiences and meanings, and to what is actually before us: This world. This student. This life.

6

To imagine pedagogy, curriculum, or school as sanctuary invokes images, thoughts, or feelings of peace, sacredness, and non-violence.

7

To utter the word sanctuary invokes a sense of spaciousness of both place and time, the kind of place where one might become aware of breathing, of silence, of stillness, of the sensory and sensual body, of the bodies and being of others both human and non-human.

8

We wake up.

9

The sanctuary is a place and time of rest. The desire to move fast and rush around falls away. To create such *restful* spaces and times is necessary to focusing, to learning, to being well, and to doing good work in the world. It is a place of rest from the frenetic and meaningless activity and exhaustion of participation in the neo-liberal, globalized economy and all that has meant for education in our time when so much of life's energy is being consumed for more production and *in the name* of the future.

10

French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (2003) called the 20th century the time of “expropriating from beings their conditions of existence” (p. 18). He describes the ways our strength, labor, bodies, senses, and even the space-time of our own singularity become objects of production. “Capital” and the “global market” only can endure and prosper by such massive expropriation and extermination. The result, he writes, is that we are “deported in advance from the here and now” (p. 19). A violence in the service of “progress” and of a future that is already known before it is lived. Educational institutions at all levels have and are participating in these processes. To invoke “contemplative,” *the temple*, in relation to schooling and pedagogy calls forth then a spiritual obligation to face, name, and resist the historical and contemporary political and economic forces that have created these institutions. This is the difficult, heavy, and ethical work of imagining and creating *other* presents and possible futures that remain free and not-yet-known.

11

To contemplate pedagogy as the time, space, and place of the temple or sanctuary implies then not the places of production, accumulation or expropriation, or of the accompanying waste, destruction, and excess with which we are so deeply familiar, but rather *the cultivation of an aesthetic of not too much and not too fast*. An aesthetic of conservation.

12

The sanctuary is not a place of competition or of getting ahead. Nor is it the kind of place that fills us with the desire to reform or fix it with fancy new programs and methods. Our desire might be to let it be. To be with it.

13

To pause.

14

Stepping purposefully and with intention, into the sanctuary, into the space for contemplation, for even a moment out of the turmoil and confusion of the rushing stream is sometimes enough to draw our gaze towards what matters.

15

To enter the sanctuary is not an escape away from the so-called “real” world; rather, this intentional action represents the possibility, so necessary in this time of unprecedented and unsustainable ecological strain on the planet, of sensing the deep and infinite interconnections with the rest of life, of our own entanglement in all this, of the co-arising of all life and its going back into the world. In recognizing the interconnectedness of life, awareness of others including the non-human others sharing this space grows. There is no desire to harm them. We are not alone. We understand that we share the same breath that has always been.

16

Chronic stress and feelings of threat give rise to fear and anxiety responses that might provoke more competing, rushing, protecting, colonizing. Sanctuary invokes images of safety, of a place where body, heart, and mind might be protected, a place where violence might not occur. This kind of safety is necessary for doing good pedagogical work in the world.

17

As a teacher educator, I visit schools often with student teachers. I witness the rushing and panic. The fear. A friend talks about sitting in a school hallway during her PhD research and observing people in the hallways. Her impression was that everyone was running and running. The thought that came into her mind was, "Where are they all running to?" In the sanctuary, there is no pre-determined destination. It is the space for observation and inquiry into the world, into our selves, into our relations. It is a space and time for awakening, over and over again, to the unfolding world around us and to our complex participation in it.

18

In the contemporary neo-liberal and ever more corporatized model of schooling, curriculum, and pedagogy at all levels, the destination is the future. This is not an indeterminate or open future that has yet to unfold; rather, it is the future that is known and colonized in advance. It is the future of competition for few resources, the future of competing to be the winner, to be on top, to be the best, to be excellent.

19

Yet, it might be in our time that it is *the future* that requires sanctuary. We know that many challenges face us and our descendants and the non-human life that share our and their space. It requires sanctuary from us and our activities, from our befouling and spoiling, from our colonizing it in advance. It requires that we leave it, and ourselves, and *all the others* some space and time to unfold.

20

Such unfolding requires a different timing. The sanctuary is characterized by *kairos* rather than *chronos*. *Chronos* is clock time, linear time, and necessary for both colonization and for capitalism to do their work.

21

Madeleine L'Engle (2001) calls *kairos* "real time" and "that time which breaks through *chronos* with a shock of joy" (p. 45). *Kairos* might be imagined as the time of love and compassion, of wonder, of open potential and unknown futures, and of yet unwritten rhythms and possibilities for all life on earth. *Kairos* is a qualitative and deconstructive timing which interrupts the line of *chronos* when we meditate, when we play unselfconsciously, and when we work creatively. It is an existential and ontological timing that might be consciously practiced in our pedagogy in the hopes of untangling ourselves from the strangling timeline of *chronos*. It is the time that faces the present with courage, compassion, and a peaceful heart and mind.

22

This is the time of the sanctuary.

23

Come in.

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