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A Pedagogical Heartbeat: The Integration of Critical and Contemplative Pedagogies for Transformative Education

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With so many figurative references to the heart, the heart has become an overextended metaphor and threatens to become less meaningful. Widely circulated books on Critical Pedagogies and Contemplative Pedagogies refer to the heart. Though they may share a sense of learning as transformation, each has a very different method, which I identify as dialectical or dialogical. And, each one defines its liberatory transformation in a very different way, one with “third space” and the other in relational and holistic space, which is considered transcendent. This essay describes two forms of heartfelt awareness, first-order heart-based knowledge and the heart’s second-order regulatory function. Then, through the lens of the heart’s regulatory function, it examines the differences between Critical and Contemplative Pedagogies. I do so in order to articulate, through the form and function of the actual heart, a model for how to measure the way contemplative and conventional philosophies of education might come together for transformative education.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, contemplative pedagogy, epistemology, heart, transformative education, third space

Everyone loves the heart. Writings abound. There is the open heart and the loving heart. An honest heart, a sympathetic heart, and a brave heart. Each one seems to extend into becoming hopeful hearts, mostly because we like to think of an ever loving heart reaching out into the world toward the hearts of other living beings, becoming the heart of a good society. What is almost always true, as well, is that all of these various hearts are courageous and kind. They are rarely wrong. True to themselves. The collective swirl of wondrous references to the heart makes me dizzy. Maybe I just have a cynical heart.

To be clear, it is not that I dislike references to the heart. It is just that the heart has become an over-extended metaphor, too modular in its unacknowledged variability. In that multiplicity of meanings something emerges, albeit tacitly; in the accumulation of allusions, actual meaning is inadvertently determined by the collective momentum of its implications. It at least seems clear that these references to the heart all seem to want to share a certain ethics, even if only in the ring of

their reception, an ethics that is somehow meant to guide me pedagogically. Because it is tacit and implied, however, it is difficult to examine what actually grounds and orients such a pedagogy, its philosophy or its practices. In this essay, I draw attention to the actual heart, its particular forms of awareness and its function, as a mechanism for measuring the healthy engagement between Critical Pedagogies and Contemplative Pedagogies.¹ To do so, I first loosen the singular grip of the heart's association with love. Then, understanding the resulting wider range of the heart's forms of awareness, I use the heart to develop a language for evaluating the mutual integration of Critical and Contemplative Pedagogies.

Though my research is based on years of work with both pedagogical approaches, in an attempt at efficient clarity my blunt categorization of them risks nuanced complexity and the precision of poetic depth.² The Critical and the Contemplative each represent a diverse set of principles and practices, from Paulo Freire to bell hooks and Peter McLaren, from Parker Palmer to Edmund O'Sullivan and Mirabai Bush.³ Yet, the categories seem to hold, identifying a coherent set of ideas. Critical inquiry, for instance, mistrusts several key concepts found in writings about the contemplative. At best, to us critical theorists the Contemplative can seem overly

1 I capitalize "Critical" and "Contemplative" in order to refer to the canon of writings about that particular philosophy of education. I recognize that both terms refer to a wide and diverse range of writings, which is why I pluralize "Pedagogies"; nonetheless, I believe that the categories are internally consistent and useful for examination.

2 My academic training is in the philosophy of language and language-based cultural studies. Language is the lens through which I view these pedagogies, and it should be clear that language is much more than just language. I explain more below.

Moreover, I have an intimate appreciation for the critical and the contemplative. After an average secondary education, I entered university unprepared. As a lower middle class, halfbreed Chicano raised in Escondido near the Mexico-U.S. border, where racial tensions were heightened, I was intellectually and politically born into a world that saw me, in various ways, as illegitimate. My white father's family disowned my mother and us children for being Mexican and Catholic; yet, in the world at large, I passed as white. In the 80s, with affirmative action, it was also a world that made available to me university tutorial services founded on critical pedagogical principles. It was there that I began to understand intimately how a word can clarify, disentangle, and reorient. And for the last two decades, I have trained in meditation, primarily in Vipassana and meditative Kabbalah, with a monk, whose classes, both collective and individual, I still attend. These two formative experiences, which are both personal and educational, shape and inevitably influence my project in this essay.

3 There are also those who attempt to bring the two together. See, for instance, the work of bell hooks, Edmund O'Sullivan, or Laura Rendón. I believe each of these, however, in their foundational presuppositions, commits him or herself to either the critical or the contemplative framework. Though this essay is not the place to work through each theorist, and I am humbled by their contributions to this conversation, I do attempt to develop a language for such an examination. Briefly, I think we can see each pedagogue's commitment in whether or not his or her primary ethical principle relies on difference and distinction or on relationality and transcendence. I would put hooks in the former and O'Sullivan in the latter. To categorize Rendón's work would require a lengthier discussion, one that would have to involve an understanding of feminist theory by women of color.

naïve, with references to “direct perception” and universalist assumptions about human nature and the good, as if the twentieth-century critiques brought about by structuralism and poststructuralism never happened. In this way, the Contemplative can be seen as an unreconstructed return to Enlightenment foundationalisms, but with an Eastern twist that captures the moral force now granted to the other. Worse, the Contemplative might seem to draw on thought that masks power and privilege, as has been done by the ideology of the aesthetic and moral philosophy since the rise of modernity, a modernity marked not by the Enlightenment but earlier, by colonialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade.⁴ On the other hand, those of us who meditate and write about the Contemplative might see such recalcitrant notions of difference as underdeveloped, ugly like the poor slave Caliban who, in his struggle for freedom, cannot get out of his own way. If only he would follow his fellow slave, the ephemeral spirit, Ariel.⁵ From this perspective, the judgmentalism of social and cultural critique is seen as bad, as if it locks the soul too much in its material struggle, which is a narrow view of human experience.

Yet, despite these mutual misgivings, the Critical and the Contemplative have much in common, most significantly their shared yearning for transformative education. But words such as *transformational*, like *heartfelt*, can be easily shared, especially when used in overly ambiguous ways. It is more difficult to live them out, to inhabit the words. This essay emerges, then, from my intimate examination of these pedagogies, as a student, a researcher, and a teacher who has increasingly integrated them into the classroom. Therefore, where categories seem overly blunt, I ask you to read with the benefit of the doubt, even if only initially. I do not write these words with a sense of closure, but rather as an initial attempt to ground language in the lived experience of the words, a point from which we can speak more clearly and honestly. Whether I read Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Heart*, a Marxist epistemology of the oppressed sprinkled with liberation theology, or Parker Palmer and Arthur Zajonc’s *The Heart of Higher Education*, a holistic and integrative model that is also interested in social justice, the qualities of the heart feel present and yet considerably different from one another. It is this that leaves me wondering how the heart can be at the center of two pedagogies that strike me as not only very different from one another, but in fact divergent. And we tend to think about

4 This adjusted chronology is suggested by several postcolonial theorists, especially those who write about Latina America. See, for instance, Walter D. Mignolo’s work (2000).

5 This is a reference, of course, to William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. In addition to that, however, it also calls up an ongoing debate within postcolonial and decolonial studies. In the context of Latina American intellectual history, there are two particular, widely circulated, texts, José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel* (1900) and Roberto Fernández Retamar’s “Caliban” (1971). These days, after the Cuban Revolution and the publication of Fernández Retamar’s essay, the character of Ariel has been critiqued and largely abandoned for attempting to purchase freedom, a sort of complicity with power. The School of Caliban, as it has been called, has eclipsed Arielismo.

divergence with concern. To understand why this need not be the case, I return to the heart itself.

There are at least two reasons why it is unfortunate that the most common way we write about heartfelt awareness is through its popular association with love. The first is how love reduces the object of the heart's attention to an ideal virtue. The heart, in reality, also perceives pain and suffering. It produces anger. The heart can be deceived and deceitful. It may even be wicked. It most certainly is easily broken. When I think of the heart I am reminded of the character Cholly in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. One of the amazing accomplishments of that novel, Morrison's first, is that even though the reader knows by the second page that in the end of the story Cholly rapes and impregnates his own daughter, by the end of the story the reader comes to feel sympathy for Cholly. My undergraduate students initially are unwilling to acknowledge this sympathy because they want to be able to hold Cholly responsible for his reprehensible action. They are unable to disentangle readerly judgment, situational evaluation, sympathy for a character, and moral condemnation. The students struggle against the reality they refuse to admit: that they actually feel badly for Cholly. Even worse, they understand him.⁶ This is made even more difficult for them when they realize that Cholly is one of the few characters whose heart opens up to and reaches out for his little daughter. In fact, as horrific as it might sound, that seems to be the very reason he rapes her. The heart, then, clearly does not on its own always offer the good and the right.

The metonymical love of a now metaphorical heart not only limits the range of sensations that the heart perceives, but it also collapses two forms of awareness produced by the actual heart. Let me explain through Harry Frankfurt's well known distinction between first-order and second-order desires, even if it suggests an epistemological hierarchy that I would reject. The first-order form of heartfelt knowledge is best described by the fact that the knowledge is, well, that it is felt. It is embodied knowledge. The heart is the location of sensate cognition. For Frankfurt, first-order desire, a yearning awareness, describes a seemingly intuitive set of desires or tastes that motivate basic choice, like a person's preference for coffee or a plant's appetite for the warmth of the sun's light. This embodied, sensory aspect is essential to every reference to the heart that I have encountered, especially in the

6 At one level, it would seem that the novel is precisely what is often written about, that an open heart allows the reader, even a reluctant reader, to connect with Cholly, a character who initially is described as "beyond human consideration." This is, of course, true; but the example of Cholly demonstrates that the heart is not wise and good, a priori. Rather, more in line with my reading, Morrison treats subjectivity, what it means to be a person, as a sort of hermeneutic circle, offering the memorable line that *wicked people love wickedly*. The novel actually requires that the reader move between evaluation and sympathy, judgment and understanding.

way in which the heart is set against the thinking mind.⁷ We use phrases like *learning by heart*, *opening one's heart*, or *being true to one's heart*. The heart's felt knowledge sits in contrast to abstraction and generalization. From this first-order awareness follows three basic points about the nature of heart-based knowledge. First, it is tangible. Unlike abstract conceptual knowledge, the heart perceives texture and vibration. It is intimate familiarity. By extension, this knowledge is immediate, and it is of the present moment.⁸ That is to say, I can feel its vibrational quality as present to me. It is to this quality that I refer when I say that it is embodied and that we can inhabit heartfelt language. Whereas all references to the heart seem to share this first-order knowledge—what is meant by the word *heartfelt awareness*—the second-order awareness produced by the heart is less discussed, and it speaks directly to cases like how to disentangle the moral mess my students go through when reading Morrison's *Cholly*.

I have second-order awareness, according to Frankfurt, when I reflect on or have a desire whose object is my (first-order) desire. When a plant follows its sense of yearning, for example, but also realizes that it prefers the various blues of the morning light and, despite the afternoon warmth, consistently turns toward the east in order to harvest mostly in the early hours of the day. Or, I might decide not to drink a cup of coffee because it is unhealthy for me or because the industry

7 Elsewhere, I link the heart to the aesthetic field. It is worth mentioning that the reason Alexander Baumgarten introduced the concept of the aesthetic in the first place was in order to examine a form of awareness in contrast to logic. Interestingly, Aristotle had already located aesthetic knowledge in the heart (erroneously believing that it was the first organ developed in a fetus). Now, as contemporary philosophers rediscover the aesthetic, broadening it from Kant's focus on art and the sublime to include the everyday and the environmental, the concept of *aisthesis* is becoming increasingly important. Aisthesis has been defined as sensate cognition (see Adler and Welsch), which again, as I read it, seems to return us to the heart.

It is worth noting two different ways to read this notion of sensate cognition. I realize that the idea of the heart's potential intelligence is not uncontroversial. Work such as Childre and Martin (1999) has been critiqued. There is a difference, though, between *intelligence* and *awareness*, and my focus is on the latter. As I point out, there can be an incompetent heart. Moreover, when I write that the heart has certain forms of awareness, it is in that regard no different than any other organ of the body. Each organ has a particular form of awareness, just as eyes are sensitive to light, or more aware of light, thereby enabling spatial orientation.

8 This is not to say that the past and the future cannot be felt by the heart or, for example, that a war 6,000 miles away cannot be felt. The heart is aware of such abstractions, but only to the extent that they are vibrationally present to the person, just as in the wake of a nightmare a person might continue to feel its terror.

does not practice fair trade.⁹ Similarly, the heart also has a second-order form of awareness. It is found in the heart's regulatory function. The heart not only feels, but it has a vital role in regulating the body's circulatory system. By perceiving the body's needs, capacity, and design, the heart regulates the flow of blood, managing its pace and pressure. Then the heart communicates with the brain in order to regulate its circulation according to the required rhythm.¹⁰ These various activities of the heart, contained in its regulatory function, require a more open sense of what the heart perceives than simply loving kindness. These activities also draw attention to the organ's organizing principle, its sense of oscillatory balance. This regulatory, second-order function can be of particular significance for the principles and practices of philosophies of education.

Since both pedagogies believe in liberatory transformation based on embodied knowledge, it is easy to conflate epistemic values (that which helps produce knowledge) with pedagogical virtue (those virtues, implied or explicit, toward which we teach), thereby collapsing these two forms of heartfelt awareness. The way the heart has come to be discussed—loving and hopeful, honest and courageous—inadvertently becomes both productive and good. But this collapse of the epistemological and the ethical disables our conversation. Therefore, since Critical and Contemplative Pedagogies both share an interest in the felt (first-order) awareness of the heart, its embodied ability to get past the limits of social discourse and language, the second-order function may help clarify their points of departure.

Each heartbeat contains two phases, the systolic and the diastolic. Systole measures the contraction of the cardiac muscles, the moment when blood is expelled from the heart, passing through its continuous chambers, out to the body.

Systole: Dialectics and the Need for Words

“Critical theorists,” according to Peter McLaren, “begin with the premise that men and women are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege” (Darder et al., 2009, p.63).¹¹ Such contradictions and asymmetries are often unrecognized, hidden by language. *Language is a*

⁹ Frankfurt, unfortunately, is invested in describing what is unique about *human* agency. For him, the hierarchy of first- and second-order desires has a rationalist leaning in which the second-order is better, or higher, than the more spontaneous first-order desires on which it is based. Not only does this diminish the simple wisdom found in a plant's movement to light, a response not so different than human sight, but it also devalues the human wisdom and creativity produced by the struggle to survive, by simple needs of existence, for any living being in this world.

¹⁰ For the first insight, I am indebted to my teacher of meditation. For the different forms of communication between the heart and the brain, see Montgomery (2008).

¹¹ See McLaren, “Critical Pedagogy: A Look at the Major Concepts,” in Darder et al. (2009).

site of struggle.¹² Critical pedagogy is about learning to put words to the previously unworded experiences of those who live on the margins of language.

Words contract. Like a person's identity, words distinguish. They mark this from that, here from there, me from you. Inversely, words also contain what is not there, the opposites and absences to which the words themselves implicitly refer. For instance, when I say that something is pretty, I have identified, at least in part, a field of other things that I presumably think of as uglier than that. When I say something is painful, I quietly mark my conception of a better or healthier life as that which does not contain this type of suffering. In this way, even the absence of something like happiness reveals the presence of something else, like the conception of happiness itself that does not exist or an indictment of whatever is the cause of its absence.¹³ It is the task of words to mark concepts. This sort of conceptual marking of distinctions, a compression of understanding into the grasp of knowledge, shapes how I see the world and myself in it.

Critical Pedagogies are dialectical. For them, learning begins with the discovery of an embodied contradiction, an asymmetrical difference, in relation to a seemingly fixed concept or category. If someone yearns for freedom but lives in alienation or unnecessary fragmentation, she embodies a contradiction. Heartfelt language puts words to such tension, illuminating embodied knowledge. This process is a struggle for the oppressed who are born into the dominant language, a language that does not represent marginalized experiences, thereby devaluing them.¹⁴ To understand this we need only to revisit the title of Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, a story in which a young Black girl, Pecola, desperately wants blue eyes. Blue eyes are not

12 See hooks (1999, 28-34), where she revisits this statement several times. It presumes what I mentioned above, that language is much more than just language. It is this understanding that is central to Critical Pedagogies. Whether we consider linguist Ferdinand de Saussure or anthropologist Clifford Geertz, language precedes thought. It is something into which we are born, providing an infrastructure for our behavior, thoughts, and imagination. Bill Ashcroft captures this well when he defines Michel Foucault's closely related concept of discourse, which for our purposes here can be replaced with language: "...a discourse [or language] is a strongly bounded area of social knowledge, a system of statements within which the world can be known. The key feature of this is that the world is not simply 'there' to be talked about, rather, it is through [language] itself that the world is brought into being" (2007, pp. 70-71).

13 The Marxist concept of alienation identifies precisely this negation of Aristotelian eudaimonia, a full sense of happiness. Ideology, like language or discourse, can mask alienation. So, for instance, capitalism can come to look natural, as if it has no history and is simply a system conducive for human flourishing. Free markets becomes yoked together with the idea of true freedom.

14 There is a paradox between social power and epistemological potential. In Marxist and feminist understanding of the production of insight, there is an epistemological advantage for being oppressed. That is to say, the oppressed live with more obvious and pervasive contradictions from which to begin dialectical thinking. That said, it should be clear that this is not the celebration of oppression. No reasonable person would prefer to be oppressed. Nor is this the silly belief that, say, in terms of race, that a person of color is always right or that a white person is always wrong.

just about blue eyes. Blue eyes, in the language of 1941 Ohio, the setting of the novel, are about being recognized and loved. Blue eyes are the equivalent of being beautiful, and beauty is about being seen with affection. When the man at the candy store will not touch her as he hands her the candy, Pecola believes it is because she is ugly. Sadly, she is correct. Then and there, as a poor Black girl she is considered too ugly to be properly recognized. If Pecola had an understanding of critical dialectics, she would have seen how her own ugliness served more as an indictment of her society and the stratified hierarchies of significance that give meaning to words. She did not. Instead, the poor Black girl wants blue eyes (in an era before colored contact lenses). She goes crazy because she has no critical language for the contradictions she embodies: a Black body, a racialized definition of beauty, and a yearning for the affection associated with beauty.

We are born into the codes and conventions of society just as we are born into language. Language is a site of struggle. And by language we do not just mean linguistic units, but also those units of meaning, such as identity, through which we know ourselves and our respective relationships to the world around us. Therefore, to become more active in language, or in culture, each person must find the words that best represent his or her lived experience. Critical Pedagogies begin with and are guided by word-based dialectical methods.¹⁵ Thesis-antithesis-synthesis.¹⁶ Several widely circulated anthologies with essays by well known pedagogues cite the significance of dialectical thinking for Critical Pedagogies. Paulo Freire, in fact, uses dialectics to describe the nature of critical consciousness through the concept of the true word as the essential element of transformative praxis:

Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. (Freire, 1970, p. 68)

The word, again, represents a more general dialectic process. Within a well-placed word, reflection on its accuracy may contradict action, or behavior may contradict abstract thought; each one speaks to the other, correcting and refining

¹⁵ See, for instance, the introduction to *The Critical Pedagogy Reader, 2nd ed.*, edited by Darder et al.; or Kincheloe's "Critical Pedagogy in the Twenty-first Century" in McLaren and Kincheloe (2007).

¹⁶ Inwood (1992) defines dialectic as: "(1) One or more concepts or categories are taken as fixed, sharply defined and distinct from each other. This is the stage of understanding. (2) When we reflect on such categories, one or more contradictions emerge in them. This is the stage of dialectic proper, or of dialectical or negative reason. (3) The result of this dialectic is a new, higher category, which embraces the earlier categories and resolves the contradiction involved in them" (pp. 81-82).

I cite this Hegelian meaning of dialectic because it is fundamental to Marxist thought, especially his earlier work, supposedly written by the "young" Marx, often considered the more humanist moment of Marx's work because of his focus on the concept of *alienation*.

along the way. From that tension emerges a new, syncretic word. As a method, echoing Socratic method, word-based dialectics are valuable for education. As a student or teacher attempts to understand, she or he uses the language of critical analysis to make sense of social and cultural contradictions.

Two prominent writers, the cultural theorist Raymond Williams and poet-essayist Audre Lorde, both use a similar metaphor in order to talk about the importance of this dialectic of words: distillation. It is a heating process that separates the more volatile from the less volatile parts, then cooling and condensing it to produce a more refined substance. At first, Williams explains how words offer clarity, but he explains that they do so by holding still, somewhat falsely, that which is in constant flux and by isolating that which is complicated and interconnected. The experience of culture is fluid and ever evolving, so Williams uses his concept *structures of feeling* to draw attention to its liveliness as well as the way in which each feeling, like the anger or sadness of Morrison's characters, emerges from a given set of circumstances, or structure. Even if that structure is not immediately evident, the feelings can draw the person's attention to it. In his explanation of structures of feeling, however, a concept meant to bring together the more wordable structures that hierarchically stratify meaning and the inchoate and emerging first-order perceptions, Williams considers the "semantic availability" of an object of awareness.¹⁷

The value Williams places on making a feeling available to language highlights the uneven epistemic value Critical Pedagogies give to words and wordlessness. Similarly, Audre Lorde, who elsewhere writes wonderfully about the uses of anger, here puts such embodied sensation in context by writing about the need for language.

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. ... This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding. (Lorde, 1984, pp. 36-37)

This semantic edge between the realm of words and the unworded pedagogically privileges words; and tacitly disregards not only the value of things that are

¹⁷ The phrase "semantic availability" comes at the end of Raymond Williams' chapter "Structures of Feeling," in which he discusses the relationship between language and feelings. It is central to his method of cultural critique.

unworded but also might preclude the very existence of that which is unwordable.¹⁸

What is significant for my purpose in this essay is to point out the orientation of Critical Pedagogy, a philosophy of education that attempts to move from the wordless (first-order) embodied knowledge to a world of words. It is in the productivity of the true word that Critical Pedagogies find transformation, the way in which putting words around lived experience constructs a new space. This new space is a more liberatory alternative to the dialectic's contradictory thesis and antithesis, produced by the epistemic product of their shared difference and tension. Social and cultural progress occurs when the new critical awareness animates behavior. Often angrily. And continuous progress occurs when the new synthesis encounters a new contradiction, and the dialectic process for the production of transformative knowledge continues to unfold, over and over again.

As a method, dialectics unify the various forms of Critical Pedagogy. The problem with this word-based dialectical method, however, is not the method itself. Rather, its weakness is its relentless valorization of words over wordlessness. The primacy of words in critical dialectics threatens over-contraction. Arrhythmia. Such forms of awareness, though necessary, can get trapped in the extended tightening of language and its linear logic, which, like a sentence, valorizes the world of the subject's action. Words yearn to clarify. They need to grasp, always distinguishing and specifying. But what if something is beyond the reach of language?

After the contraction comes dilation. The diastolic. Tension and release. Differentiation expands and disperses. And blood returns to the heart.

Diastole: Dialogism and Its Wordlessness

Contemplative Pedagogies refer to a wide range of formal exercises, from stillness meditation to creative acts. It also includes relational and movement practices, generative and ritual/cyclical exercises. In its "Tree of Contemplative Practices," the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society cites these as well as activism and volunteerism. With a list that feels as exhaustive as this one, it should be clear that what define Contemplative Pedagogies are not merely the acts themselves. There is a qualitative dimension.

In an academic world of achievement and assessment, how do we justify a pedagogy whose meditative practices resist both the desire for achievement and the anxiety to assess? In the current literature there are a few different approaches. Because of its attempt to account for the full range of practices that might be considered contemplative, the work from the Center captures well some of the most essential elements, and is one of the more value-neutral, or balanced, descriptions.

¹⁸ The obvious example of something unwordable would be the possibility of the existence of God, or "G-d," which emphasizes this fact. Williams, here, as a cultural materialist, is consistent, though he may inadvertently slip into the trap of the scientific discourse that he is trying to avoid.

In “What is Contemplative Pedagogy?” Arthur Zajonc coheres all of these meditative practices around two essential ends:

- the cultivation of attention and emotional balance
- the development of faculties required for insight and creativity.

As Zajonc goes on to explain, our capacity for attention is precious, and central to the learning process, and therefore central to any pedagogy. “While few would deny this, conventional pedagogy makes little effort to develop the student’s native capacity for attention directly” (Zajonc, 2008, p.9). While I appreciate the inclusiveness of the Center’s list of contemplative practices—I often say that my introduction to meditation was my childhood love of shooting basketball—such an exhaustive list and such a value-neutral description of their attention to attention still does not capture the essence of Contemplative Pedagogies, nor is it meant to.

More than just a set of practices or the cultivation of attention, what marks Contemplative Pedagogies is something about the qualitative dimensions. This qualitative dimension seems to defy definition; yet, I only need to attend a conference about contemplation in higher education or read almost anything on the subject in order to see that there is more at play. Parker Palmer, in a book co-authored with Zajonc, tries to get at it by describing the philosophical foundations underlying what he calls “integrative education,” and seems to characterize a common view in Contemplative Pedagogies. First, Palmer demonstrates a link between a historical era’s particular ontological view and the dominant pedagogy of the time. Discourses tend to cohere. He uses the example of how the Newtonian view of reality, with the help of social Darwinism, affected our notion of the self and a competitive understanding of human relations.

That view, in turn, helped shape an educational system premised on the notion that knowledge consists of collecting atomistic facts about an atomistic reality, facts to be delivered by individuals who know them to others who do not in a system where learners compete with each other for scarce rewards. (Palmer, 2010, p. 25)¹⁹

Every ontology is linked with a certain epistemology, and that epistemology extends naturally to a particular pedagogy. And, as we know, every pedagogy has an underlying ethics to it, even if unstated. There is a certain art of living demonstrated by the course design, the classroom arrangement, the professor’s demeanor, etcetera.

After establishing this link between ontology and epistemology, pedagogy and

¹⁹ Interestingly, Aronowitz and Giroux have a description of the last two decades that sounds equally atomistic: “During these years, the meaning and purpose of schooling at all levels of education were refashioned around the principles of the marketplace and the logic of rampant individualism. Ideologically, this meant abstracting schools from the language of democracy and equity while simultaneously organizing educational reform around the discourse of choice, reprivatization, and individual competition” (quoted in O’Sullivan, 1999, p. 5).

ethics, Palmer describes our current ontology as relational. Whether we consider systems theory, deep ecology, or Gestalt psychology, we can say that we are examining the importance of matrices of relationships. In this, he is consistent with many writers, from David Bohm's sense of wholeness to Laura Rendón's integrative and consonant pedagogy. And it is for this reason that the concept of community is crucial for Palmer's work. It is in community that we inhabit a relational field of experiences (ontology). If knowledge is justified belief, then it is in our subjective and inter-subjective experience of community that we come to know about ourselves and the world we live in (epistemology). It follows, then, for Palmer as well as Contemplative Pedagogies in general, that this multidimensional worldview can only come about in dialogue, a less linear and more open conversation that includes multiple perspectives without hierarchy in a unified whole (pedagogy). This immersion into relationality is why an ethics of engagement is so significant for Palmer's formulation.²⁰ If this is the foundation of higher education's heart, the confluence of ontology, epistemology, pedagogy, and ethics makes it seem like the heart's primary function is the confluence itself; which is why dialogical method becomes central to the Contemplative project. What better to account for multiplicity than dialogue, open and undifferentiated? It allows for a certain secular spirituality. Indeed, the relational would seem to also account for race, class, and gender, the sociopolitical triad at the center of Critical Pedagogies. Additionally, dialogism offers a platform for whatever pedagogical approaches a person would like.

But dialogism has at least two weaknesses worth mentioning, and therefore is not sufficient on its own to characterize the Contemplative. The first is illustrated by Parker Palmer's otherwise wonderful description of what he calls a spirituality of education in *To Know As We Are Known*. Citing Robert Frost's poem "Two Tramps in Mud Time," Palmer tellingly links this relational ontology with its corresponding epistemology:

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.

The line of sight from each eye combines into one unified vision. It is a rich image. From the union of two individual eyes a single vision is produced; and, it is because of the union of these two different perspectives that we are able to see depth and dimension. Palmer calls this "wholesight," a term that captures the allure of holism and dialogism in writings on the Contemplative, as it has been described by many of its most widely circulated authors (e.g., Zajonc, Palmer, Rendón, O'Sullivan). On the other hand, however, notice that the depth perception and di-

²⁰ There is again overlap with recent aesthetic theory. See Berleant's *aesthetics of engagement*.

mensionality that emerges from the metaphor of this single vision does not involve the actual interaction of the left and the right eye. It is simply their coexistence that gets translated by the mind into a unified vision. There is no mechanism for managing the exchange, no pedagogical guide: it is as if when you simply put conventional and contemplative methods side by side, something happens. While I appreciate the epistemological uncertainty for which this allows, it not only seems too open-ended but it also could devolve into pedagogical relativism: in the classroom, is every dialogue as functional as every other? Are there good and bad dialogues?²¹ Also notice how this understanding of dialogism erases the epistemological value of difference, further distancing the Contemplative from the Critical. It seems to suggest two unsatisfying options: either there is no interaction or there is complete union.

The other problem with dialogism parallels the first. Whereas Palmer writes in an almost causal chronology, from ontology to epistemology to pedagogy and then ethics, there is a less linear way to categorize them. They fall into two sets of pairs. Between ontology/epistemology and pedagogy/ethics there is a significant distinction. It is the matter of choice. That is to say, while ontology and epistemology describe a state of being and the nature of knowledge, pedagogy and ethics describe the art of doing something, either learning or living. And artistry requires making choices. For the ontological, relationality captures well the interlocking matrices of the various discourses in which we live. It follows, then, that epistemology should yearn to be relational as well, even if in the process we also become increasingly aware of the limits of our knowledges. Unfortunately, pedagogy and ethics are fundamentally about the choices we make, what to do and how to do it. When I have to decide what to do in today's class session of seventy-five minutes, in a fifteen-week course that meets twice a week, do I teach this or that? Do I teach it from this perspective or that one? Do I give fifteen minutes or seventy-five to a meditation-based exercise? I must evaluate significance and make choices. Wholesight and harmony do not offer a method for making such pedagogical judgments.²² (This is an advantage for Critical Pedagogies, which identify their shared quality as a method, i.e., dialectics, which does not presume a particular ontology.)

We can use an exhaustive list of practices and the philosophy of dialogism in order to identify Contemplative Pedagogies, but something essential seems to still be missing. I have referred to it as a qualitative aspect of experience. I believe that

21 Rendón seems to openly refer to this in the name of her pedagogy, which is both *integrative* and *consonant*. Apparently aware of the possible relativism of the integrative, with "consonant" Rendón accomplishes what others try to do with the over-extended metaphor of the heart. Harmony is her more encompassing, and more elegant, sense of ethical orientation which stabilizes the otherwise free-flowing moral flux.

22 A third problem, though this essay is not the place to elaborate, is that *wholesight* is too ambitious. It is the same reason I prefer the name *meditative pedagogy* over "contemplative" pedagogy, which carries with it too much expectation.

it is this. Whereas critical consciousness privileges the world of words, the contemplative—with a simple sense of appreciative aspection—savors wordlessness. It might at first seem paradoxical to associate wordlessness with a pedagogy also defined by dialogism, but it is important to distinguish between *dialogue* and *dialogics*. One has to do with speech, the other has to do with relationality. For instance, both Paulo Freire and bell hooks write about the importance of dialogue in the classroom; yet, even though there is an ethical thrust in how they write about it, both Freire and hooks write about dialogue more as a practice. It is the nature of a conversation in the classroom or an interview between a working-class white man and a Black woman: “an interaction across and with our differences” (hooks 132). Despite their appreciation for dialogue, both Freire and hooks ultimately identify as foundational dialectic pedagogical methods that depend on identifying difference and the uneven distribution of power. Dialogics, on the other hand, is not about speech (though conversation can be dialogic). Dialogics draws on the formalist work of literary theorist M. M. Bakhtin: as opposed to monologic, dialogism suggests multiple subjectivities co-existing, becoming something new in a novel’s larger narrative. This is why dialogism is so common in *Contemplative Pedagogies*, because of how dialogics poetically suggests a certain wordless quality. The various contemplative practices all cultivate the student’s capacity to tend to this sort of wordless dimension of experience.

Wordlessness refers to something other than these ideas I am sharing with you, because these are wrapped and delivered in words. With my words I can only point to dimensions beyond the limits of language, to the ocean on the other side of the semantic sand on which I sit. Indeed, it is the impossibility of its representation that enriches music and poetry.²³ Wordlessness is the feeling, to me, of my body at rest in the embrace of the ground. I cannot exactly put it into words. It is the cool breeze of a refreshing inhale, or the burn of anxiety in the middle of my chest. And it is the soft, unshareable, vibrations of every other everyday experience. Even though *Critical Pedagogies* also depend on heartfelt knowledge, especially that aspect which is inchoate and emerging, the dialectic process is conveniently clean, confining such knowledge to linguistic categories and linear progress. The Contemplative relishes in the wordless, though tangible, dimensions of experience. That is why it defies definition.

The point might be made from another direction. Mirabai Bush opens her

23 W.J.T. Mitchell (1995) says that creative art emerges from the inevitable gap that exists between lived experience and the representation of that experience. As he puts it: “The problem with representation might be summarized by reversing the traditional slogan of the American Revolution: instead of ‘No taxation without representation,’ no representation without taxation. Every representation exacts some cost, in the form of lost immediacy, presence, or truth, in the form of a gap between intention and realization, original and copy. . . . But representation does give us something in return for the tax it demands, the gap it opens. One of the things it gives us is literature” (p. 21).

essay, “Contemplative Higher Education in Contemporary Life,” with the following quote by Thomas Merton:

The fruit of education, whether in the university or in the monastery [is] the activation of that innermost center, that apex or spark which is a freedom beyond freedom, an identity beyond essence, a self beyond ego, a being beyond the created realm, and a consciousness that transcends all division, all separation. (Bush, 2011, p. 221)

Bush’s description, as always, captures well the essential elements of Contemplative Pedagogies. Notice, of course, how the quote by Merton is so much more than a list of practices or a description of the relationality found in dialogue. With Merton, Bush opens by grounding the awareness of Contemplative Pedagogies in “the activation of that innermost center,” a phrase that recalls the heart. Notice, too, though, the word that is most often used in the passage: *beyond*. The preposition “beyond” is used four times, only to be replaced by the last line’s *transcendence*. While the idea of transcendence can be troubling for critical theory because it diminishes materiality and difference, the contemplative does not shy away from it. Indeed, the word *beyond* is used repeatedly precisely because the writer cannot account for what he is trying to describe with words alone. The object to which the passage refers is, quite literally, beyond the words available to the writer. Wordlessness. Dialogism is significant because it is in the relationality that one moves beyond the atomistic and the individual. In the classroom, a conversation moves beyond an individual perspective when we share ideas. Or, as Merton writes, in meditation, as we sink deeper into the sense of the ground and breath, it can also speak to a self beyond the self we know. Even to a freedom beyond freedom, whatever that might be.

To avoid arrhythmia or arrest, the heart maintains an open-ended, non-repeating rhythm through the systolic and diastolic phases of the heartbeat. Contraction and dilation, compression and expansion. The heart yearns for balance in this oscillatory rhythm.

The Balanced Heart: Producing a Transformative Space

To close, let me revisit the idea of transformative education, of creating in the classroom a more liberatory space, in order to clarify the pedagogical model offered by the heart, a framework that is not only about formal meditation practices but might also contribute to conversations about teaching in general.

Above, I make brief reference to the pedagogies’ respective images of transformative education. Both see liberatory transformation as the production of a new space. In Critical Pedagogies, it usually emerges from the contradictions revealed by word-based reflection and action: the true word transforms the world. The product of this dialectic (or praxis) is what postcolonial and critical theorists write

about as *third space*.²⁴ From difference, distinction, and the contradictions that bind them emerges a more liberatory space. For *Contemplative Pedagogies*, the sense of liberatory space is not based on contradiction as much as union, a more integrative or holistic standpoint. This union transcends the particular, the presumed location of difference, which is one reason the contemplative space is often described in terms of harmony and wholeness. A place beyond this one. Not bound to the particular. The dialogic is inherently more relational and multidimensional than a dialectic, and therefore also seems more immediately whole and harmonious. Even though these two pedagogies, as I describe them, hold different conceptions of what a liberatory space might look like, both think about the transformational as a new space. The classroom is an obvious example. To learn is to change one's mind. In class we attempt to change and transform a student's understanding, with a more hospitable home for all students and their diverse forms of intelligence. But, like a heart that over contracts or dilates, each of these approaches has severe limitations, as does their respective view of what orients transformation.

In order to identify a more viable understanding of the liberatory dimension of transformative learning, I am intrigued by the oscillatory, rhythmic movement between the two phases of a heartbeat, systole and diastole. In the systolic phase the cardio-muscular system contracts, forcing blood away from the heart. In the ensuing diastolic phase, the heart releases the tension and dilates, allowing blood to flow once again back toward, and into, the heart.²⁵ It is in this way that a cycle of oxygenated, de-oxygenated, and re-oxygenated blood flows through the body, touching each and every cell in order to continuously nourish the body and expel its waste. Balance. I want to mark certain elements of this process that are important for understanding liberatory transformation. First, notice how each phase, the systolic and the diastolic, contraction and dilation, is born from and simultaneously gives birth to the other phase. Each phase of the heart is, in fact, product as well as precondition of the other phase. The heart cannot contract unless it has already dilated. Nor can it dilate until it has contracted.

Let me return to the spatial example, drawing attention to the understanding of space offered by the heart. When I think, for instance, of our common conception of space I might think of the doors of a house. We usually think of doors as something we open and then pass through in order to get to another place, to somewhere other than where we are at. In this way, the door leads to a new space. Or, we think of a door in terms of safety, locking it shut in order to protect us from that which exists outside, in that other place. Whichever the case may be, this sense of space draws attention to differentiation and connection. The heart,

²⁴ See, for instance, Soja (1996).

²⁵ I must credit the work of Stephen Buhner. Not only does the initial inspiration for the structure of this essay come from his project (2004), but this basic description of blood flow, to and from the heart, comes from a central point of his thesis.

however, offers us a different sense of space. Systole and diastole. Tension and relaxation, retraction and release. Between the end of systolic contraction and the initial moment of diastolic dilation, the heart creates space. It is not a new space, though. It is space inside of itself. The chambers empty, for however briefly, and between the phases of a heartbeat an openness is created. An openness in order to re-nourish. So the heart does not produce a new space. It creates space anew. As a result, in order to identify that which grounds and guides true transformation, instead of space we can talk about the production of spaciousness.

Spaciousness is not a place at all. It is a quality. A living quality of experience. Whether we describe political liberation or the moment a student, in sudden realization, gasps “a-ha,” what we actually appreciate in each example is the quality of spaciousness that has occurred. It is not the degree of depth or distance. Spaciousness is the quality of having enough room. Roomy or ample. Not about naked expanse. It is about expansion, of the limits of what currently exists. Less limited, less confined. It might be found in the farthest reaches or in the deepest depths, but is always present in the simple act of stretching a tightness. Spaciousness is created by movement. A wiggle where there once was only stiff stillness. It is found when someone loosens congestion, or in an honest statement that disentangles some familiar, knotted thing. Such as when someone finally recognizes domestic violence as violence. An opening where once it was not as open. Like when a young, college-aged boy who is half Mexican and half white realizes that his father’s family was just racist, and that even if others do not see him as Latino, he can still be Chicano.²⁶ And, there again, when the same Chicano boy lets the anger loosen, even realizing that some of the anger is not due to racial tension.

Since the physical heart also maps the energetic flow of blood, we can talk about pedagogy and the production of knowledge in similar terms of more spacious awareness. Indeed, it is the quality of spaciousness that makes sense of the integration between conventional word-based pedagogies and meditational pedagogies. Again, notice the nature of newness when we talk about creating new knowledge. Words and wordlessness contain the same energetic elements as the heart. Embodied words—those whose meanings are not emptied by, say, clichés—tacitly contain the sort of living presence that escapes the words themselves, that ghostly matter that oozes around the sequence of letters we read, one after the other, seemingly endlessly.²⁷ Likewise, in lived experience it is from the wordless, both the as-of-yet unworded as well as the unwordable, from which new words emerge. One includes the other, without erasure. Indeed, our awareness of them is

26 Naomi Scheman, in the context of feminist consciousness raising group, offers a more elaborate description of this process, of how a name or label, or a word, can actually change an emotion. See her chapter, “Anger and the Politics of Naming” (1993).

27 For a wonderful examination of *ghostly matter*, see Gordon (1997).

both product and precondition of the other. And a new word opens up a space in a person's consciousness, a space that becomes material when it indexes future behavior (Freire's transformative praxis). The newness of these new words is important. New words, whether neologism or the application of a word in a new way, are not the creation of a new language. Within the already existent language, they are the creation of a space anew. And with them the language becomes more spacious. Such poetry is not just found in a poem. It can be found in a scientific breakthrough, or in a historical text that reorients my thinking. Spaciousness is the enchantment and tranquility found in a struggle for liberation. It is in the embrace of heaviness I find in my increasing awareness of roots sinking down more deeply into furrows in the ground's open field. Paying attention to the qualities of spaciousness draws attention to the qualities therein, which somehow changes the experience itself, as anyone knows who meditates or who has taken the time to carefully look at an emotion, like explosive anger, and then sees the qualities of that emotion evolve inside of itself. Transformation.

Since I practice meditation, in my classes I regulate this heartfelt energetic flow using exercises derived from formal meditation, most simply through the use of (wordless, meditative) focusing and (unedited, spontaneous) freewriting, culminating in the more conventional formal essay. Other teachers do similar exercises, too. The point is that contraction and dilation can be present with any activity. To recognize it, all we need to do is pay attention to the heightened concentration students have right before an examination and compare that tension to the energetic qualities of a conversation held the day after the examination. Contraction and dilation. In the same way that the heart regulates the flow of blood, we can begin to take the pulse of how we regulate the energetic flow in the design of a course, in a sequence of class sessions, or in the exercises within a class session. Moving between contraction and dilation. To be clear, the heart does not control the flow of blood and does not ensure certain results. The heart does not progress linearly and it is not one-sided (in other words, the heart's movement is not primarily dialectic or dialogic). The heart nourishes through a non-repetitive movement between its phases. It is not their contradiction or the erasure of their differences, not transcendence or moving beyond, but an ongoing, ever adapting oscillatory rhythm within the body itself.

The pedagogical heartbeat is underwritten by the creative wisdom of the struggle to survive, by open dialogue with other organs of the body, and an epistemology of uncertainty. The uncertainty is not only felt by the students but also by the professor, who through structure and guidance offers pace and pressure, but then relinquishes the pretense of knowing exactly what will come. The energetic movement cannot be mastered, but we can manage it. The healthy heart perceives need, capacity, and design; based on those, it then makes choices, communicates

with the appropriate parts of the body, and acts accordingly. With this understanding of the heart we also see how the insights of meditational pedagogies should not be limited to those of us who practice formal meditation. The heart offers a language for how to gauge the energetic rhythm of a classroom. Like taking a pulse. And it offers insight into the transformative aspect of our learning, and yearning. Like the heart in a body, we can manage that rhythm and begin to learn how to teach students to produce the quality of spaciousness.

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