

January 2013

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Recommended Citation

Keiser, David Lee (2013) "The Common Core of a Toothache: Envisioning A Pedagogy of Renewal and Contemplation," *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15760/nwjte.2013.11.2.4>

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The Common Core of a Toothache: Envisioning A Pedagogy of Renewal and Contemplation

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Abstract

In this article, the author makes a case for the metaphor of “Sea Mind” as seen through the lens of pedagogy and describes the importance of his perspective for teaching and teacher education. As a teacher educator who has engaged both educational and contemplative work, his essay introduces the concept of a Sea Mind’s relationship to contemplative teaching and explores the challenge of maintaining healthy selves in a raging river of high-stakes testing and test preparation and the rough waters of public school reform.

Children without dental care are more likely to have toothaches; untreated cavities are nearly three times as prevalent among poor as among middle-class children. Although not every dental cavity leads to a toothache, some do. Children with toothaches, even minor ones, pay less attention in class and are distracted more during tests, on average, than children with healthy teeth. (Rothstein, 2004, p. 39)

More than 40 dentists and other dental professionals, many of them volunteers like Dr. Van Dam, are providing free dental care at several sites on the reservation during Rosebud Dental Days this week. In the first two days, 131 patients received dental care valued about \$32,000. (Rapid City, SD Journal, July 26, 2013)

Unfortunately, there’s been too little honest conversation and too little democracy in the development of the Common Core. We see consultants and corporate entrepreneurs where there should be parents and teachers, and more high-stakes testing where there should be none. Until that happens, it will be hard to distinguish the “next big thing” from the last one. (Rethinking Schools Editorial, 2013, Summer, 27, 4)

Introduction: The Common Core of a Toothache

For anyone who has had serious dental pain, what counts as “the next big thing” is irrelevant. The shooting or throbbing sensation easily recalled by survivors of dental procedures is singular and makes a powerful symbol of how socioeconomic issues can affect schooling. As Rothstein (2004) states above, dental care provides a sad aperture into school achievement, as toothaches can well impede student health and success, including attending class and taking tests. While dental care, per se, is only one of many variables that affect student attendance and achievement, the universal viscerality of tooth pain makes it a salient entrée into our brief discussion of the common core. Not the Common Core State Standards only, but the common core that both unites and lies fallow—shared humanity, kindness, universal sacrifice and suffering, and breath.

For the first two decades of the 21st Century, Federal education policy in the United States might be encapsulated by a dozen words, or three four word phrases: *No Child Left Behind*, *Race to the Top*, and *the Common Core State Standards*. *No Child Left Behind* is perhaps the most inaptly titled, appropriated from the Children’s Defense Fund’s *Leave No Child Behind Mission*. *Race to the Top* used financial leverage to reform teacher evaluations, and now, the third lexical quartet, *the Common Core State Standards* looms as a Leviathan to which all teachers and students must submit.

Also in the early 21st Century, American Indian communities such as the Rosebud and Oglala Lakota Reservations in South Dakota have significantly fewer opportunities and rarer dental care than most of the country. In the above example, virtually all of the Rosebud patients accepted free extractions; and the average ‘free’ dental care was \$244 per person. On the reservation and at the market in Wanblee, South Dakota, one observes ample need for residents’ dental preservation as well as the unfortunate eventuality of extraction.

Tooth pain and bone pain cut to the core. They can test one’s physical limits and also empower one’s sense of self and possibility. Yet these experiences in life, and one’s ability to get along with others, arguably matter more than performance and mastery of material easily tested. A recent book by Paul Tough (2013) speaks to this need. He argues in *How*

Children Succeed, that grit, curiosity, and character matter more than innate cognitive ability. Unsurprisingly, these attributes are harder to ascertain than static test scores. Yet the words Common Core are instructive both for their brevity and their misleading yet pithy evocation. What are truly common to our core are viscera, breath, tendons, and blood. Oceans and seas surround us and the language we use is insufficient to convey the complexities of life. Still, what is common cosmically connects us and is not static knowledge or any specific cultural literacy.

The power of place is to locate, to situate oneself, to find again. Much like the fisherwoman plying a pole or a fisherman witnessing the ebbing of the tide, sea mind locates oneself at the edge of possibility, the risky space fraught with potential and promise as well as humility. The purpose of this essay is to argue for a return to expansiveness in education; not ease, but expansiveness. This essay will posit that the quality of sea mind—expansive, open, transcendent, and inclusive—transcends discipline and grade level and current school reform or “next big thing.” Deep under the gloss of school reform movements and next big things lie incredible untapped potential and much of this is unseen, even ineffable. As infinite possibilities loom at the sea’s horizon, so too can educators create universes of inspiration and possibility. Conversely, the “consultants and corporate entrepreneurs” do not seem to believe that all children are teachable or that educational opportunities are infinite. In fact, the scarcity model in education—that the best public education is for some students, not all—is now both operationalized and unquestioned.

Caring for Sea Mind: Envisioning a Pedagogy of Renewal and Contemplation

The sea hath fish for every man. (William Camden, 1605)

The sense of infinite provision offered by the English historian William Camden simply encapsulates a sense of possibility, an absolute belief in the ability of the sea to feed all. Two additional citations help shape this cosmic possibility.

And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. God called the dry ground “land,” and

the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1:9-10)

The sea does not reward those who are too anxious, too greedy, or too impatient. One should lie empty, open, and choiceless as a beach - waiting for a gift from the sea.

(Anne Morrow Lindbergh)

Let us refer to an expansive and nonjudgmental attitude as Sea Mind—the sense of limitless possibilities and spontaneous flexibility that naturally occurs when we humans let go of ourselves as masters of the universe or apex predators of the earth and skies. Sea Mind represents an opening, a sense of expansiveness and clarity and wonder about the world. Facing the sea’s shore, many experience a sense of safe overwhelming—the expanse and depth can both intimidate and nurture, make both secure and insecure—at the enormity before us. There is also danger and a need for constant vigilance. The popular book and movie *The Life of Pi*, for example, evoked both real and imagined magic of the open water; for the protagonist Pi, the sea was both sustenance and depletion, both friend and adversary.

Let us maintain as well that Sea Mind is a trait or a state rather than a place—there is no sea to go to, per se—that is accessible to all, even those landlocked or otherwise water-averse people. It is both a state, as in the expansive sense one feels while at the beach or shore, and a trait, as in those who seem able to access this sense as a normal or typical or regular feeling. In teaching and teacher preparation, such a perspective cannot be assumed.

In the brief essay that follows, I will make a case for the metaphor of Sea Mind seen through the apertures of pedagogy; that is, I will describe the importance of this perspective for teaching and teacher education. I am a teacher educator at a large public university who has long engaged with both educational and contemplative work, and this essay is one encapsulation of my wake from the burgeoning tide of contemplative teaching. The essay is structured by an introduction to the concept of Sea Mind and its relationship to contemplative teaching, followed by field and classroom explorations and anecdotes. The

discussion and conclusion frame the paper in a larger academic and pedagogical context; specifically, the challenge of maintaining healthy selves in a raging river of high-stakes testing and test preparation and the rough waters of public school reform.

Seeing What Is Not Yet Visible: Imagining Different Pedagogical Waves

Educational philosopher Maxine Greene has long argued that we cannot achieve what we cannot imagine; that is, we unnecessarily delimit our human possibilities by forgoing or truncating our imagination. Said another way, we can program ourselves from regimented living and learning rather than succumb:

When habit swathes everything, one day follows another identical day and predictability swallows any hint of an opening possibility. Only when the given or the taken-for-granted is subject to questioning, only when we take various, sometimes unfamiliar perspectives on it, does it show itself as what it is—contingent on many interpretations, many vantage points, unified (if at all) by conformity or by unexamined common sense, (Maxine Greene, 1995, p.23).

The habit against which Greene (1995) cautions could refer to many things that occur in schools—the practice of elementary students lining up by height; the consistency of saying the Pledge of Allegiance every day in public schools; and the resolute gospel of high-stakes test scores can constitute habits which may well inhibit possibilities. As a means to “posit alternative ways of living and valuing,” imagination allows the unthinkable to be thought and the veiled to shine through.

Two phrases I often use in my college teaching are, “You cannot imagine falsely,” and “Nothing you create can be wrong,” from *The Life of Poetry* by Muriel Rukeyser. Unlike the static and reductionist recall knowledge of a standardized test, students’ imagination and creation, or creativity, are neither easily quantified nor always visible. Teaching with a contemplative perspective requires our vigilance at protecting such qualities in teaching and learning settings and policies. Teaching with a Sea Mind, then, includes the capacity, commitment, and courage to imagine and co-create rivers of possibility with our students.

Crafting Teacher Education Classes with Mindful Teaching

When I began teaching in 1990, I used methods I now consider to be part of my contemplative toolbox, but did not have a language or a field within which to frame them. At the time, lessons and units on creative writing, visioning, and slow movement, for example, just seemed to me to be good teaching. When I began teaching at the university level five years later, content demands did curtail classroom time, but contemplative apertures appeared through office hours, mid course feedback, listening exercises, and kindness. In this section, I will illustrate both the need for and examples of several contemplative classroom methods, exercises, or offerings. Although the explicitly contemplative examples emanate from my work with the *Center for Contemplative Mind in Society* and *The CARE for Teachers Program*, they are undergirded and steeled by my many years teaching prior to my introduction to the concept of contemplative pedagogy at the “Making Peace with Ourselves in the World” Conference at Teachers College, NYC in 2005. The first I will describe is referred to as Just Standing, Silent Presence, or the Stage exercise. Since that time, I have embraced, explored, and espoused teaching with a mindful, contemplative perspective.

How to teach what some call classroom management remains a perennial challenge. New teachers, often young, discover what it means in practice is not as simple as setting and enforcing rules, but rather an expression of balance. Helping new teachers develop their presence and self-awareness in front of class is fundamental to teacher education. It is a listening closely for the sea in a shell, for finely attuning to the sound of the nuanced hum of synergistic sharing. Teacher education must attend to the affective domain, and teachers need to develop their inner resources, such as “interiority,” including “capacities for presence and attention, breakthrough and clarity, detachment and metacognition, and emotional resilience and balance,” (Hart, 2007, p. 247). That being said, unfortunately formal schooling and teaching settings provide ample evidence of the opposite as well. Two classroom examples help underscore the need for such attention.

Some years ago, during a short tenure in the San Francisco Public Schools, I was able to witness some extremely questionable teaching. The teacher herself did not seem to want to

be there, in the low-income Geneva Towers neighborhood, with a 6th grade class of students with special needs. The pedagogy was both pathetic and poisonous. For example, as part of her daily do-now assignment, the teacher counted down the remaining school days on the chalkboard; i.e. *There are 180 days in the school year. Today is day 89; how many days are left?* Not only was such work not interesting to the young tweens and teens, it bespoke general anomie—if the teacher is counting down the school year in January, it doesn't bode well for stewardship or modeling. But the following exchange between the same teacher and a student illustrates this feeling and, by extension, the mindlessness embodied in the room. Said another way, the teacher could not 'just stand.'

Teacher: Do I have to ask you to leave?

Student: Why? What did I do?

Teacher: I don't know, but someone did something.

Student: You didn't even let me finish.

Teacher: Good. I don't want you doing things I don't know about.

Good luck with that wish. The above passage well illustrates what not to do to create a trusting classroom. The student is unjustly accused, then told he's not to act without the teacher knowing, all the while the teacher admitting she doesn't know he did anything wrong. The school provided fertile ground early in my doctoral training—a veritable cornucopia of worst practices. But for me, it steeled me for the challenges of maintaining a mindful perspective: Just as I would have to hold my tongue at friends' houses growing up, I learned to abide by others' classrooms, and learn what not to do. Or, if you will, I learned to swim with the current, not against it.

Approximately ten years later, while observing a student teacher for the third and last time, an incident underscores the need to teach classroom presence and acceptance. The student teacher gave his final official teaching demonstration in front of his university supervisor, and it involved Business Math, computer terminals, and student research. The lesson was

clear, interactive, and reasonable, but he was unprepared for a student's challenge to his authority as a teacher:

Student: Mr. R., Why do we have to do this?

Mr. R: (getting progressively more frustrated). It's an important assignment; it's the end of the unit; and, and because I'll give you a Zero if you don't!

In the back of the room, I thought, "So close, Mr. R., so close." I use this example when preparing teachers because it illustrates the irreducible need for a strong teaching presence. In this case, the class was going well, that is, the students were engaged in the lesson but the teacher could not realize and enjoy that harmony, preoccupied as he was with feeling challenged and perhaps disrespected in front of me, his university supervisor. His teaching presence was tenuous and it showed. And through this aperture—the need to develop the teaching presence—the worth of mindful teaching or contemplative pedagogy is made visible. The expansiveness of the sea is clarified.

Stage Exercise: The acceptance of what is not yet—in the aforementioned case, self-confidence in student teachers—is integral to the development of teaching perspective, presence, and acumen. In short, simply standing in front of the class can be challenging for many new teachers. The following exercise can be adapted in many ways, but here is the basic instruction: A minimal 'stage' area is set, with no lecterns, chairs, or desks impeding the classmates' view of the teaching candidate. The student simply walks mindfully to the front, pauses and takes a deep breath, stands up straight, makes eye contact at least once with everyone in the room, and mindfully walks off the 'stage,' takes another breath, and goes back to their seat. That's all there is to it, and yet it is invaluable to many of my students, most of whom are adolescents, are self- and other-conscious, and are at times uncomfortable being stared at. As teachers, they'll need to get over this, and the using the Stage helps.

Pith of Perspective Exercise: Nearly every semester I teach a class about equity and diversity in schools. For one of my readings, I assign a short anthology of Haiku poetry. After reading poems in English and Japanese, and writing their own Haiku, I give them an

exercise intended to help them hone their teaching credo or educational philosophy. It is adapted from an exercise I completed at an Academic Retreat; here I call it the Pith of Perspective Exercise. I ask my students to first write down a paragraph describing their field; most responses begin.... *Mathematics is about.... or In Physical Education we....* This is the concrete or objective contribution. Then I ask them to describe themselves in the field; i.e. *I teach English because...or I will be a strong History advocate in order to....* This is the subjective or critical contribution. Last, I ask them to boil down their previous two paragraphs into a three or four word phrase. This is the creative or expansive contribution. In being able to successfully describe their pedagogical orientation, at least in a rudimentary and organic way, they are more easily introduced to the resolute need for clarity and confidence in teaching. Like a funnel or tributary that helps the flow of slow water, so too have I found contemplative practices such as this one to help students go slower and to create. The total exercise takes no more than five minutes but, in that time and that focus of attention, they come to better understand themselves as teachers—how they think about their field, their role in it, and the pith of their perspective on teaching.

Listening Exercises: In the same course, I assign a short article by Brenda Ueland, an early 20th Century journalist and author. Her article, entitled “Tell Me More: On the Fine Art of Listening,” promotes listening without judgment as a higher virtue than speaking,

Now, how to listen? It is harder than you think. I don't believe in critical listening, for that only puts a person in a straitjacket of hesitancy. He begins to choose his words solemnly or primly. His little inner fountain cannot spring. Critical listeners dry you up. But creative listeners are those who want you to be recklessly yourself, even at your very worst, even vituperative, bad-tempered. (Ueland, 1993).

Concurrent with this text, the students engage in a sustained three-minute monologue in partners. One student speaks, from a prompt (*i.e. What do you look forward to when you have your own classroom? Or: What are some subjects or subtopics in your field? Or: What challenges do you expect in teaching?*) for three minutes uninterrupted. Then they switch roles and with a different prompt, the listener now speaks for three minutes. In the debriefing after the

activity, most students remark on the difficulty of simply listening without commentary and as well on the difficulty of speaking without interruption for the same three minutes. In addition to slowing down their perspective about what three minutes feels like, the exercise helps them identify or even empathize with the disempowerment their students may feel if unable to speak in class.

Conclusion: Making Friends with Jellyfish in the Sea

Throughout the country, we are told that everything we have been doing in our schools is wrong. The education system that once was the envy of the world has become a hopeless, costly, out of control dinosaur. Further, we hear that the only way to save American education is through school reform—to manage our schools as though they were businesses, employing powerful, hard-nosed leaders who make tough rules and use data to measure students' progress and teachers' accountability in order to punish those who impede success, (John Owens, *Confessions of a Bad Teacher*, p. xvi.)

As the sea recedes, we are left with a low tide rendering of what remains. Mindful teachers and thoughtful citizens would do well to consider both the purposes as well as the measured effects of education; that is, why do we educate? If the development of a thoughtful citizenry is an aim, for example, it would seem our curricula, our systems of teacher preparation, and indeed our school policies would reflect such thoughtful consideration. But as Owens (2013) illustrates, school “leaders who make tough rules and use data,” seem more common and impactful than those who espouse curiosity, imagination, and transcendent vision. Jellyfish may be present, but may be avoided by living the “unexamined common sense,” to which Maxine Greene alluded.

As part of the journey described herein, I led a mindful reading group for teachers at a local high school. We met weekly in a room in the library, and one of our readings was *Coming to Our Senses*, by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Towards the end of the book, a passage emerged as particularly meaningful to the group,

When we reside in awareness, we are resting in what we might call an orthogonal reality that is more fundamental than conventional reality, and every bit as real. Both pertain moment by moment, and both demand their due if we are to inhabit and embody the full scope of our humanness, our true nature as sentient beings. When we inhabit this orthogonal dimension, the problems of the conventional reality are seen from a different perspective, more spacious than that of a small-minded self-interest. The situations we face can thus admit possibilities of freedom, resolution, acceptance, creativity, compassion, and wisdom that were literally inconceivable—unable to arise and sustain—within the conventional mindset. (p. 351)

With the same expansive mind with which this paper began, let us conclude this treatment of one contemplative pedagogical path. Let us ‘embody the full scope of our humanness,’ and ‘inhabit this orthogonal dimension.’ Let us think of education, of schooling, as more spacious than a pond or a lake. Let us return to the concept of sea mind, of inclusive, transparent, and nonjudgmental awareness and commitment. And to the *Life of Pi*.

It was on my own, a guilty pleasure, that I returned to the sea, beckoned by the mighty waves that crashed down and reached for me in humble tidal ripples, gentle lassos that caught their willing Indian boy. (p. 10).

The guilty pleasure of sea mind, of caring enough about teaching and learning to do it for a lifetime, of being open to the sensations and nuances of the world. When one thinks of 21st Century public education in North America, one thinks instead of limitations, of bite-sized readings, small enough to digest without preparation or attention. Perhaps canned tuna, as compared to fresh fish, fits into our sea metaphor here. What students of all ages and abilities need from formal schooling is much broader and more diverse than bite-sized curriculum and canned tuna; they need fresh fish. They need to not lose wonder about the world. As stated by Arthur Zajonc,

An education that would reach beyond information must work deeper; it will need to transform the very container of consciousness, make it more supple and complex. For this, we educators need pedagogical tools other than those

optimized for information transfer. At its most advanced stage, we will need to help our students and ourselves to create a dynamic cognitive framework that can challenge established intellectual boundaries, and even sustain the conflicting values and viewpoints that comprise our planetary human community. (Zajonc, 2006, p. 1-2)

The paradoxes of teaching and teacher education include the ways in which the information age can cloud or clarify the purposes of schooling. Two examples from popular media exemplify this paradox. The first is a half-page graphic that appeared in *The New York Times*. The artist Jonathan Harris printed a list of approximately forty sentence pairs, beginning with “Data will help us remember, but will it let us forget?” and, salient to this paper, “It will help educators make excellent standardized tests, but will it help us embrace different standards of excellence?” Perhaps, perhaps not.

The second paradox reflects what happens when good ideas spread. In a *Wired* magazine article entitled “Enlightenment Engineers,” the author provides a snapshot of the contemplative programming underway in Silicon Valley. The subtitle? “It’s not just about inner peace—it’s about getting ahead,” meaning that an offshoot or by product of ‘searching within ourselves’ is already tied to productivity and profit. Thankfully, most of us can search within ourselves and simply become more mindful educators. Just as the sea swallows without regret, caring for sea mind requires a respect for predators and perils. Programs such as those mentioned herein swim against the stream of testing and measurement and competition, and public figures from Tim Ryan to Goldie Hawn sound the foghorn, but those of us in the sea need to keep our heads above water. Students in our nation’s schools and universities deserve the best creativity, imagination, and vision we have to offer, including a capacious perspective on the world. All educators can collectively care for the sea mind of transparency, inclusion, clarity, and expansiveness.

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