

## Teaching in the Presence of Burning Children: Attending to Tragedy and Faith in Philosophy of/and Education

By Jeffrey Ayala Milligan

*Let us offer, then, as a working principle the following:  
No statement, theological or otherwise, should be  
made that would not be credible in the presence of  
burning children.<sup>1</sup>*

In a 1974 essay entitled “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire,” Rabbi Irving Greenberg offered the “working principle” quoted above in response to Christian silence during the Holocaust and as a kind of moral plumb line by which post-Shoah theological claims should be measured. Later, the Christian theologian Douglas K. Huneke cited Greenberg’s principle in his own effort to reflect upon the meaning of the Holocaust, and Christian silence in the face of it, for post-Shoah Christian theology.<sup>2</sup> I have been troubled and strangely called by Greenberg’s principle ever since hearing of it for the first time almost ten years ago. But one is tempted to remain silent in the face of such a principle lest anything one says fall short of it and risk banality, risk a trivial response to the most profound

**Jeffrey Ayala Milligan is an assistant professor of history and philosophy of education in the College of Education at Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida.**

## Teaching in the Presence of Burning Children

---

and troubling of human experiences. Moreover, the problem of evil and the inevitability of the tragic have vexed philosophical and theological reflection for centuries. No single essay can possibly hope to review such a body of literature or even begin to offer a philosophically coherent response. Yet Greenberg's principle, written at least partly in response to the silence of ordinary people in the face of such experiences, is simultaneously a call to speak out in response to such experiences as well as a measure of the credibility of such speech. Such a call demands a response, particularly at a moment in history when we are forced to see, as he did, the resonance between the scriptural imagery of his title and the concrete images of contemporary reality. We must, therefore, respond, albeit from the ultimately inadequate, provisional and circumscribed locations of our own experience, understanding, and insight.

As a philosopher of education I am particularly daunted by Greenberg's reference to statements "theological or otherwise," for it challenges me to reflect upon the significance of tragedy for secular education and thus engage a centuries-long conversation about topics that have confounded the conceptual nets of far more competent philosophers. But in the light of all that has happened in the past two years, in the shadow of all that happens year in and year out to remind us of the realities of Greenberg's clouds of smoke and pillars of fire, I am moved to apply his working principle to the enterprise of public education as it is commonly practiced in the U.S. and the claims made about it, philosophical or otherwise. In this essay, therefore, I propose to reflect upon the question of what it might mean to teach in the presence of burning children, and what it might mean to do philosophy of education in their presence.

---

### The Call of Their Presence

Greenberg's principle, and Huneke's application of it to Christian theology, was proposed in response to the Holocaust as a specific, historical event whose impact on all subsequent human choices and deliberations must be understood. While privileging the historical specificity of the Holocaust and the singular victimization of the Jewish people it represents, I would like to suggest that the image of burning children stands not only for the concrete suffering of very real individuals at a specific moment in time, it also symbolizes the thousands of other individual incidents of suffering, whether occurring in ones or twos here and there around the world or in spasms of violence that approach the horror of the Holocaust. For we need not look far to find further examples of deliberate violence against both children and adults in places like Cambodia or Rwanda or in acts of terrorism in New York, Oklahoma City, Cairo, or Jerusalem. Nor need we look too far into the recesses of history to see the nameless, unnumbered acts of abuse, crime, and violence against children, women, gays and lesbians, cultural and religious minorities and other vulnerable people. Many thousands suffer the fires of poverty, hunger, and exploitation. And we all suffer, in Cornel West's

words, the “death, disease, despair, dread and disappointment” that is common to all human experience.<sup>3</sup>

I recognize that in speaking of the tragic as a continuum of experience encompassing the Holocaust as well as the, perhaps, more mundane despair and disappointment I may well be stretching the concept in ways that seem obscene to some. For such a broad conception of the tragic may trivialize such events by suggesting that they are inevitable, something to be borne rather condemned and remembered as a deliberate act of human will. It may also exaggerate the significance of our inevitable disappointments and eventual death by suggesting that they are somehow akin to the specific events with which Rabbi Greenberg’s working principle is obviously concerned. Perhaps it is more appropriate to make a distinction between tragedy as the unavoidable “death, disease, despair, dread and disappointment” and evil as conscious acts of human choosing. But surely, though Rabbi Greenberg’s principle responds to the specific suffering of the Holocaust, its relevance is not limited to it. It challenges us to risk incredibility by eschewing silence in the face of human suffering, whatever its source. Applied to education it highlights possible silences as well as the dangers involved in responding to them. But it demands a response.

---

### Response as Acknowledgement

I would like to explore the human response to this reality first through the lens of literature and secondly through the witness of people who have suffered the fires of war, poverty, oppression, terrorism *and* “death, disease, despair, dread and disappointment.”<sup>4</sup> I choose both imagined and “real” cases of suffering and the responses of those who suffer because, as Aristotle recognized in his definition of tragedy as a literary genre, fiction and the experience of others are forms of witness to the reality of suffering, a general reality often accessible to particular individuals at a particular moment in time only through such lenses even if the nature of that individual’s personal experience has provided him or her with the sad knowledge of first hand experience.<sup>5</sup> Though the source for reflection may be fictional, the suffering it points to is very real.

N. Scott Momaday’s (1968) *House Made of Dawn* offers just such testimony.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on Native American experience in the U.S. after World War II, it offers a glimpse into the cultural destruction suffered by Native Americans through the personal suffering of its central character, Abel. Drafted into the army during the war, Abel returns to the reservation psychologically devastated, torn between two worlds and trapped in a self-destructive cycle of alcoholism, violence, sexual nihilism and despair. “He had lost his place,” Momaday writes. “He had been long ago at the center, had known where he was, had lost his way, wandered to the end of the earth, was even now reeling on the edge of the void” (104). But in that moment of despair, in the sense of being poised on the edge of the abyss, he experiences a

## Teaching in the Presence of Burning Children

---

vision, an image that frames the book and reoccurs throughout: old men in white leggings running after evil in the night.

The runners after evil ran as water runs, deep in the channel, in the way of least resistance, no resistance... suddenly he saw the crucial sense of their going... They were whole and indispensable in what they did; everything in creation referred to them. Because of them, perspective, proportion, design in the universe. Meaning because of them. They ran with great dignity and calm, not in the hope of anything, but hopelessly; neither in fear nor hatred nor despair of evil, but simply in recognition and respect. Evil was. Evil was abroad in the night; they must venture out to the confrontation; they must reckon dues and divide the world. (104-5)

This image of the race of the dead opens and closes the novel and represents one of the expressions of his culture Abel's grandfather has consciously passed on to his grandson. At the end of the novel, after the death of his grandfather, Abel joins the race of the dead, apparently resolving his alienation by resuming his place within the symbolic universe of his people. His response to his own despair, expressed in the ritual language of his people's response to the reality of evil, suggests that the first, fundamental response to suffering is recognition, and respect. Evil is. It must be acknowledged, and that acknowledgement entails response, not in the hope of victory, but in the recognition that it is and that the hope and continuity of being lies in the perpetual struggle, the perpetual race of old men in white leggings running after evil.

However, the conception of evil here is not of some malevolent, supernatural personality, but rather the formlessness, the chaos out of which everything we hold dear is formed and against which it must be defended, whether embodied in impersonal forces of nature or the personal of individual human will. The act of running is a symbolic response to a fundamentally aesthetic responsibility: the creation of perspective, proportion, design, order. Everything in creation depends upon it. Yet they run without hope or despair, fear or hatred, thus their running enacts both recognition of and a response to the tragic. The old men running after evil recognize that their creation, everything they hold dear, is doomed, yet it is indispensable that they continue. Momaday's insight, I believe, suggests that teaching, and philosophizing about teaching, in the presence of burning children requires a greater attentiveness to the tragic.

Tragedy, of course, has long been a topic of interest to philosophers. Socrates excluded tragedies from the education of the young in his state out of concern for the emotional effect they might have on prospective guardians, and Aristotle's analysis of it has long framed much of the subsequent theory of tragedy as a literary genre.<sup>7</sup> Rousseau located the beginning of moral development in Emile's witness of suffering and the sense that he was not immune to it, and Nietzsche wrote on the birth of Greek tragedy and the regeneration of German culture.<sup>8</sup> Much of the philosophical and literary analysis of tragedy foregrounds discussion of it as a literary genre, attending less — though not forgetting — that the power of the

literary genre rests on the audience's recognition that it imitates a reality to which we are not immune. Taking Greenberg's principle seriously, however, demands that we reverse the emphasis, attending primarily to the reality of the tragic without losing sight of the important, indeed indispensable, insight that the literary genre offers on the reality. Taking Greenberg's principle seriously will not allow us to succumb to the inevitability of the tragic: that would be to run in despair. Nor will it allow us to await conceptual clarity: that would be to run with hope. Taking Greenberg's principle seriously requires us to run.

Like its parent discipline, philosophy of education too has, to some extent, attempted to formulate a philosophical response to the tragic. Burbules (1990) and Arcilla (1992), for instance have reflected upon the appropriate response of educators to what Burbules calls the "tragic sense of education," the fact that "education is a perpetually incomplete and potentially unfulfilled process... whose intended outcome is... inevitably in doubt."<sup>9</sup> Burbules suggests pragmatism as a response to this reality which avoids the dangers of pessimism and utopianism while Arcilla argues that pragmatism, with its emphasis on consequences, is itself too hopeful, suggesting a "Pascalian wager" of faith in our aspirations as educators even in the face of the tragic in education as, in a sense, the only decent thing we can do.<sup>10</sup> More recently, in a review of major themes in philosophy of education in the 1990's, Bolter (2000) has asserted that "tragedy, measured by material or emotional loss, cannot help but be a potent sign of the millennial times," and that concern with the "inevitable conflict of ego with the impermanent world" and the loss of faith in "metanarrative solutions" represent prominent issues of concern for philosophers of education in the 1990's.<sup>11</sup>

While the teacher's sense of the tragic in education and the intellectual's tragic awareness of the collapse of metanarrative solutions are real and significant, they are not, I believe, in themselves adequate responses to Greenberg's working principle. They are part of the race, but it does not end there. Greenberg's clouds of smoke and pillars of fire are first real and then symbolic, thus his working principle seems to call for attentiveness first to the experience, the undergoing, of tragedy as well as the cognitive awareness of the tragic. Greenberg's principle suggests a conception of the tragic Cornel West (1989) has described as "highlight[ing] the irreducible predicament of unique individuals who undergo dread, despair, disillusionment, disease and death *and* the institutional forms of oppression that dehumanize people," what Miguel de Unamuno called the tragic sense of *life*.<sup>12</sup>

I would like to suggest that this is the conception of the tragic education must acknowledge and respond to if it is to be credible in the presence of burning children. West's conception of the tragic, however, is at one level dualistic. It includes suffering that is the result of human actions — institutionalized forms of oppression — and thus subject to change, and suffering that is inevitable — dread, despair, disillusionment, death, etc. The first kind of suffering we would call injustice. Perhaps its most extreme forms deserve the name evil. The second sort of

## Teaching in the Presence of Burning Children

---

suffering included in West's conception of the tragic is, I think, closer to the common sense of the tragic as the awareness of our inevitable failure in "the conflict of ego with the impermanent world," the conflict between order and chaos.<sup>13</sup> Both forms of suffering are integral to a conception of the tragic credible in the light of Greenberg's principle for, though we answer injustices with the struggle for justice, we know the struggle can never ultimately be won, thus injustice takes on the inevitability of the tragic. The explicit rendering of this distinction in West's conception of tragedy is useful, however, in posing a central question of this essay: Do American schools venture out to the confrontation with the tragic? Do they adequately prepare children for the race? To what extent are they credible in the presence of burning children?

Though it is, perhaps, dangerous to generalize about institutions as complex and various as American schools, I think there is little evidence that our schools even acknowledge the tragic, let alone venture out to the confrontation, and are thus, by Greenberg's principle, *incredible*. It is important to acknowledge, of course, that on the first aspect of West's conception of the tragic — injustice — there has been and is a significant dialogue that critically scrutinizes racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of institutionalized oppression and advocates ameliorative social action. Much of that dialogue and social action has taken place in schools, making both schools and society, in some ways, better places than they have been in the past. While we cannot consider the struggle against institutionalized forms of oppression won — especially in a historical moment characterized by the ascendance of market models for almost every sort of social interaction — we can at least acknowledge that, on this front of the tragic, the battle is joined.

I think our schools neglect the second front, however, and thus leave students vulnerable to the myth that injustice is a thing of the past and complacent in the sense that "hard work" or money or social success can buy us out of any problem, even, ultimately, the inevitability of the tragic. Because these are myths, this neglect can only lead to cynicism or despair. According to Kenneth Benne (1967), we offer children melodrama — stories dividing experience into blacks and whites and lacking the ambiguity from which powers of judgement and choice emerge — or morality plays — stories that subsume the individual and her responsibility for choice to the predetermined answers of ideology, science, religion, or convention. For the intellectually inclined, perhaps, we offer existential dramas that focus on the meaninglessness of individual choices and our inability to learn from them or the suffering they entail. Such curricular fare, Benne suggests, leaves students oblivious to the tragic or paralyzed in the face of it.<sup>14</sup>

Implicit, I think, in Greenberg's principle is a requirement that education answer to experience, that it acknowledge the presence of burning children and respond to this knowledge by attempting to transform that experience, where possible, or cope with it, where it is not. Education that ignores experience, either by propagating the happy myths of melodrama or restricting the range of experience

to which it attends to those kinds of experience instrumental to others' morality plays, is, like so many Christians in the face of the Holocaust, silent in the presence of burning children and thus complicit. As Dewey (1938) noted, a theory of education answerable to experience, that accounts for experience even as it seeks to direct future experience, is marked by two criteria: *continuity* — the idea that an educative experience must be meaningfully linked to prior experiences even as it enhances the student's ability to learn from future experiences — and *interaction* — the idea that the nature of any particular experience is influenced by environing conditions.<sup>15</sup> Thus an education answerable to the human experience of the tragic would need not only to acknowledge the fact that "contemporary experience is full of the stuff of tragedy," but would also need to take account of the ways in which we make sense of and respond to that fact.<sup>16</sup> How, then, do people commonly make sense of and respond to the tragic?

---

### Response as an Aesthetic of Faith

I would like to explore this question by reflecting upon another piece of literature, Toni Morrison's (1988) *Beloved*.<sup>17</sup> I do so, again, in the belief that a work of literature, to the extent we find it meaningful, depicts insights into human experience that we recognize as "true" even if they are "unreal."<sup>18</sup> One of the most powerful insights contained in this novel is the question of how individuals and peoples survive and go on with the memory of irretrievable loss and the realization that there is no real defense against future loss. Set in the aftermath of the Civil War, *Beloved* explores the struggle of an African American family to live with what slavery has done to them and forced them to do. One of the characters — Baby Suggs, "holy" — responds to her newfound freedom and painful memories by putting her heart to work "giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her business and hers alone" (137). She becomes the heart of her community, teaching its members to love themselves as a fundamental step in the process of learning to love others and thereby create and sustain community.

One of the ways Baby Suggs enacts this response to their tragic experience is through community rituals in a forest clearing in which, as in Momaday's account of Native Americans' response to evil, she acknowledges what they are up against — "O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight" — and then calls them to participation in a ritual of song, dance, tears, laughter, and exhortation that helps to create and sustain the loving community that enables, though it does not guarantee, survival (88). These gatherings in the clearing are ritual improvisations, drawing on the fragmented memories of their African cultural past, the profoundly re-interpreted Christian expressions of white society, and the exigencies of their own present need to fashion healing rituals that bind individuals together into a loving community. Thus Baby

## Teaching in the Presence of Burning Children

---

Suggs' response to the tragic, like Abel's old men running after evil, highlights the significance of ritual acknowledgement and the responsibility to create and sustain community across time as well as space by love of self and others.

But Baby Suggs' heroic efforts are in the end no defense against evil. When white slave catchers arrive at her home to return her daughter-in-law, Sethe, and grandchildren to slavery, Sethe kills her baby daughter to prevent her return to slavery. Stunned by Sethe's choice, and by her utter defenselessness in the face of this evil, Baby Suggs succumbs to despair and takes to her bed to contemplate color until her death. Meanwhile Sethe, suffering the insufferable and alienated from the psychic sustenance of community, lives in isolation with her remaining daughter, Denver, until the return of the slain daughter engulfs her in a whirlpool of longing, guilt, despair and isolation that threatens to destroy them all. Finally, on the edge of this abyss, Denver summons the courage to reach out to her community in order to save her mother. Isolated for years in their home, however, she is unable to leave the house because she knows evil is out there: "Out there where there were places in which things so bad had happened that when you went near them it would happen again... What was more — much more — out there were whitepeople, and how could you tell about them?" (243-4).

At this moment, as Denver, in effect, contemplates the inevitability of tragedy, Baby Suggs speaks to her from beyond the grave.

You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you about that? My Jesus my.

But you said there was no defense.

There ain't.

Then what do I do?

Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on. (244)

Denver then "goes on out the yard," reaching out to the community of black women in Cincinnati who come together in an act of spontaneous ritual, a ritual composed of fragments of African and Christian tradition reminiscent of Baby Suggs' sermons and designed to rescue Sethe from the abyss her despair has driven her to by ritually reclaiming her as a member of the community and placing themselves in solidarity with her against the tragic reality her dead daughter symbolizes. In this ritual, and in Baby Suggs' admonition to Denver from the grave, we learn what Abel learned from the old men running after evil. There is no defense, but there is survival and hope enabled by one's responsibility to community forged by love and sustained across time by stories and ritual.

Not surprisingly, this survival instinct in the face of tragedy, this turn to loving communities, is frequently embodied in the symbolic grammar of myth, ritual, and tradition. This is clearly seen in Abel's ritual participation in the race of the dead, in the clearing sermons of Baby Suggs, "holy," and in Sethe's rescue by the black

women of Cincinnati. This “fictional” insight into human experience of the tragic seems valid because it seems to reflect what we so often see among actual communities confronted by death, dread, and despair or institutionalized oppression. In the face of the tragic, many turn to religious traditions.

While the turn to religious faith is by no means a universal response to the tragic, it is a common one. As Cornel West (1989) reminds us “the culture of the wretched of the earth is deeply religious. To be in solidarity with them requires not only an acknowledgement of what they are up against but also an appreciation of how they cope with their situation.”<sup>19</sup> This observation is borne out by the real life responses of those who have experienced institutionalized forms of oppression and the tragedy of violence. Muslim communities in the southern Philippines, for instance, have struggled for generations with endemic poverty, the loss of land, inadequate access to education and health care, political marginalization, and the violence of a conflict between their government and Muslim separatists that has claimed more than 100,000 lives, displaced many more, and left them with some of the highest indices of social and existential stress of any group within this already impoverished country. While Muslim Filipinos have dealt with their tragic reality in a variety of ways, one of the most prevalent has been a re-emphasis of their distinctive Islamic identity as, perhaps, the only form of faith left to them in a situation that inspires so little faith in their government or local leaders. In the U.S., many citizens of Oklahoma City responded to the 1995 bombing of the Murrah building by turning to religious beliefs for an explanation of what many saw as a manifestation of evil, solace for their grief and pain, and the hope that might sustain them as they went on with lives forever changed by this act of terrorism.<sup>20</sup>

Education that is credible in the presence of burning children, that is answerable to the human experience of the tragic by its adherence to Dewey’s criteria of continuity and interaction, must surely take into account the fact that the wretched, and not so wretched, of the earth often cope with tragedy through myths, traditions, and rituals embodied in religious faith. This need not, of course, mean that public education should give itself over to religious indoctrination or that, in the words of some Christian fundamentalists, we should “put God back in our schools.” It does mean, I believe, that education answerable to experience and credible in the face of the tragic cannot ignore religious belief. It also means that those of us who philosophize about education cannot afford to ignore questions of what this belief means for education. To ignore such questions, or to take a reflexively anti-religious stance as so many progressive intellectuals have done, is tantamount, West argues, to “political suicide...turning the pessimism of many self-deprecating and self-pitying secular progressive intellectuals into a self-fulfilling prophecy.”<sup>21</sup>

---

### **The Optimistic Theodicy of American Education**

Why the paucity of attention to the tragic in American education? There are

## Teaching in the Presence of Burning Children

---

a variety of possible reasons. One, obviously, is the inherent hopefulness of education. We send the most vulnerable and beloved members of our community to school to ensure a better future for them. Attending to the tragic seems an admission of the inevitable failure of those hopes, an admission all the more unbearable where our love and hope are greatest. Another reason, I think, is our material prosperity, a prosperity that enables our common faith in the power of individual effort and desire to make tomorrow a better day than today and to insulate ourselves from the grim realities of life that plague others less fortunate than ourselves. This faith is aided and abetted by an idolatrous capitalist culture that preaches relentlessly that there is a marketable commodity to satisfy any need and that the great purpose of education, and life itself, is the fullest possible participation in the creation and consumption of things.

Inattentiveness to the aspect of tragedy as the inevitability of death, disease, despair, dread, and disappointment is moved not only by inherent hopefulness and preoccupation with the practical matters of getting along in life. It is motivated as well by our understanding of the intimate connection between such concerns and religious belief. For we are all too aware of religion's historic and contemporary role in intolerance, oppression, and violence against people of different faiths, people of no faith, and other vulnerable groups deemed beyond the pale of acceptability as defined by religious traditions. Desire for order becomes an injustice itself and the aesthetic responsibility of Momaday's old men and Morrison's Baby Suggs collapses into idolatry. To protect against these dangerous aspects of religion and to preserve the unfettered right of believers to practice their faith, the framers of the U.S. Constitution established the doctrine of separation between religion and state, a doctrine that requires the state, and its various agencies, to remain neutral in matters of religion. While this requirement, enshrined in the First Amendment, does not in principle prevent students from discussing religion in schools, it has in practice been used, among other reasons, to justify curricular silence on religious questions.<sup>22</sup> This often means that schools avoid any discussion of religion. A few have mistakenly attempted to enforce a silence on religion that occasionally infringes on the religious rights of some children. Either form of silence leaves unexamined the assumptions and practices shaped by the hegemony of local religious culture and exacerbates schools' tendency to neglect the reality of the tragic.

We are also, I think, suspicious of the discourse of tragedy and faith because we are understandably wary of the too easy resort to formulaic religious responses that often substitute for genuine reflection and are used to justify injustice. The encounter with the tragic or deliberate injustice, as in the experience of Sethe and Able, the violence of the suicide bomber, or the death of a child tears a hole in the fabric of meaning. This tear in the warp and woof of myth, history, meaning, and hope from which we render our lives intelligible, purposeful, and hence bearable confronts us with a horrifying black hole of meaninglessness, reminding us of the constructedness of the fabric and its ultimate inadequacy to cover us. Confronted

with such a reality we are tempted to pretend we do not see or to hastily patch the hole with ready made materials crafted from the comfortable conventions of accepted wisdom, which is often, paradoxically, religious.

We see this response in the character of Schoolteacher, in *Beloved*, who rationalizes Sethe's horrific act as the predictable behavior of a mistreated animal rather than the consequence of his own brutal, dehumanizing violence against a fellow human being. We see it also in the all too facile characterization of terrorists as "evil doers" and the current war on terrorism as a battle between good and evil. The fact that such language apparently resonates with much of society is an indication of the power of mythic and ritual traditions to explain tragedy and sustain us in the face of it, but these examples also impress upon us the danger of too easily and quickly applying such religious patches to these tears in the fabric of meaning. The apparent lesson of Momaday's Abel and Morrison's Baby Suggs was that evil must first be acknowledged, the fact of the tragic must be respected, for from such acknowledgement might come understanding of the extent to which such tragedies might be susceptible to understanding and amelioration.

This suspicion of religious understandings of the tragic and corresponding faith in the possibility of ameliorative action reflects a painful awareness of the long and oppressive history of religious "melodrama." Dewey, in drawing a distinction between religion and the religious impulse, recognized both the oppressive history and liberating potential of religious faith. He sought to emancipate the religious impulse from its dependence on the supernatural absolutes that lead to dogma and persecution. By surrendering "the whole notion of special truths that are religious by their own nature," Dewey suggested that the religious impulse might be attached to "patient, cooperative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, record and controlled reflection...the one sure road to truth." Thus the ameliorative potential of the religious impulse might be separated from oppressive tendencies of supernatural religion.<sup>23</sup>

In attempting to separate the religious impulse from traditional religion Dewey correctly highlighted the possibility of moral critique and struggle without recourse to religion and called us to such struggle as a faith that is both necessary and common. And while he recognized that for many faith remained entangled with traditional religion, he seems to have hoped for the surrender of traditional religion for this "common" faith, assuming that society, aided by science, would grow out of its adherence to it. But this Deweyan conception of faith fails to adequately appreciate the continuing significance of traditional religion as a set of beliefs that make life meaningful and tragedy bearable for millions upon millions of people. While Dewey's conception of faith is a common faith in the sense of being widely held, it is far from common in the sense of being universally held, for it is a faith that requires relative prosperity and democratic freedom. It assumes the possession of the material and existential resources that can render one's belief that tomorrow can be made a better day through human effort a realistic possibility. The "wretched of

## Teaching in the Presence of Burning Children

---

the earth” — many Muslim Filipinos, for instance — often do not possess such resources. And many of the not so wretched, like the citizens of Oklahoma City or New York, cannot entirely share Dewey’s apparently total faith in the efficacy of science and cooperative, democratic effort as a response to the tragic for they, like Baby Suggs, are stunned by their personal defenselessness, by the fact that, as Baby Suggs says, “they came in my yard.” This Deweyan faith, according to West (1993), is constrained by an overly optimistic theodicy that fails the challenge of “defining the relation of democratic ways of thought and life to a profound sense of evil.”<sup>24</sup> It fails, in other words, to recognize that “evil is abroad in the night,” that “there is no defense,” and that we must “venture out to the confrontation.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, by itself, it fails the test of credibility in the presence of burning children.

### **Deweyan and Religious Faith**

The faith Dewey defines as “the unification of the self through allegiance to inclusive ideal ends which imagination presents to us and the human will responds as worthy of controlling our desires and choices” is, nevertheless, vitally important.<sup>26</sup> It is the faith of the struggle for justice against injustice. It is the faith of all those teachers, activists, and scholars who summon the courage to name man-made acts of violence and oppression and work for their transformation. It is vital, but for many it is insufficient. For in its necessary belief that human action can bring about positive change, it cannot account for the ultimate failure of such efforts, for the inevitability of the tragic. By itself it risks despair in the presence of burning children. Thus many, even among those deeply engaged in the struggle for justice in the here-and-now, remain deeply rooted in the faiths of traditional religions.

But while public education in the U.S., as well as the philosophy that inquires into it, has long espoused, more or less, Dewey’s conception of faith, they have both tended to ignore or dismiss the philosophical and educational significance of the fact that this faith has not supplanted traditional religious faith as Dewey hoped, but rather that both continue to exist side by side in American society.<sup>27</sup> These religious conceptions of faith, moreover, are far more diverse and subtle and far less antagonistic to progressive educational ideals than the fundamentalist perspectives that sometimes seem to dominate the political debates over education and trouble secular educators. Both critics and the most public defenders of religion often espouse a propositional conception of faith, which holds that scripture contains divinely revealed truths and that faith requires the obedient reception of those truths.<sup>28</sup> While such a view might seem to confirm secular critics’ fears of an irrational fundamentalism, at least one contemporary philosophical perspective on religion — reformed epistemology — argues that such religious faith regarding scripture can constitute a quite rational response to the acceptance of a “properly basic belief,” the assertion that there is a God, which is as warrantable as the assertion that there is no God.<sup>29</sup> This choice between “properly basic beliefs” suggests yet

another conception of faith as “the acceptance of certain beliefs by a deliberate act of will.”<sup>30</sup> Faith has also been conceived as “the state of being ultimately concerned,” a state which, when oriented toward “preliminary concerns” becomes idolatrous, but when oriented toward the “ultimate” is religious and total, “excluding no part of ourselves or our world” and providing “the reality, the structure, the meaning, and the aim of existence.”<sup>31</sup> Such is the faith of Momaday’s old men running after evil and Baby Suggs’ clearing sermon.

This conception of faith, it seems to me, is both what makes religious faith a powerful response to the tragic and an aspect of human experience that need not and ought not be bracketed out of the range of experiences deemed educationally relevant in public schools. Dewey’s conception of faith and this religious faith are not necessarily mutually exclusive alternatives, though they are often treated as such. They can be mutually reinforcing approaches to living in the face of tragedy that simultaneously engage people in struggling against injustice while offering existential sustenance in the face of the inevitably tragic nature of human experience. Cornel West (1982) describes this in the context of African-American religious experience as a “Christian dialectic of human nature and history” that, in recognizing human beings as both fallen and made in the image of God, highlights the responsibility of the individual to struggle for the realization of moral ideals that we know cannot be fully realized this side of heaven.<sup>32</sup> Thus West’s Christian dialectic embraces a humility which eschews the absolutist claims of fundamentalists as a degree of certainty simply unattainable by imperfect, fallen beings and a hope that sustains individuals in the struggle to realize idealized ends despite the tragedy of their inevitable failure. This combination of humility and hope is part of what enables West to embrace the anti-foundationalism of pragmatism and a Deweyan faith in intelligent democratic engagement while holding fast to his Christian faith. This is what West calls prophetic pragmatism.<sup>33</sup>

In making the claim that contemporary education does not adequately attend to the tragic or people’s response to it, I do not want to minimize the importance of Dewey’s conception of faith, nor do I mean to ignore the notable exceptions among philosophers of education who are deeply engaged in exploring the relevance of religion and religious traditions for education.<sup>34</sup> Nor do I mean to privilege those religiously conservative voices whose apparent concern for the relationship between religion to education masks a hegemonic desire to see their particular beliefs dominate the schools and society at the expense of religious diversity and tolerance. I am suggesting, however, that public education fails to acknowledge the tragic sense of life that we all, children and adults alike, experience and thus fails to account for the educational significance of the fact that both Deweyan and traditional faiths exist side-by-side in the classroom. And I am questioning whether the philosophy of education, legitimately concerned with criticizing and deconstructing oppressive concepts and practices — many of them religious — has adequately helped educators reflect on the educational significance of tragedy and

## Teaching in the Presence of Burning Children

---

people's response to it. I am asking, in effect, whether we have fallen short of Greenberg's working principle.

In spite of the fact that schools are free to teach about religion and religious questions, many American educators have too long assumed that the Constitutional separation of church and state requires the dichotomization of educationally relevant human experience between the secular and sacred, material and spiritual, immanent and transcendent in ways that suggest civil institutions like schools can only appropriately concern themselves with the left side of the dichotomy. The right side is somebody else's business, as if the development of children into adulthood were some sort of assembly line where educators only have the responsibility of depositing math or history into a child, rather than a cooperative moral and aesthetic endeavor in which all members of the community, including the child, participate. The assumption of this dichotomization has led some to call for "putting God back in our schools" in ways that clearly violate the Constitution and for others to police religious expression and discussion in ways that violate the rights of individual students. But these realms of human experience are not so easily dichotomized. Surely the "secular" decisions we make about what we will teach and students will learn, what kinds of lives we will live, and the way we will relate to others have implications for what we think sacred. And surely our beliefs about the transcendent affect the choices we make and the way we conduct ourselves and our relations in the here-and-now. In this modern version of King Solomon's effort to determine to which of two mothers a child belonged we seem content to cut the child in half or to give her up entirely to the custody of one mother or the other.<sup>35</sup> We do not seem to entertain the possibility that she is the ultimate responsibility of us both.

---

### Teaching in the Presence

What are the consequences of this dichotomization of experience for children? Are they, like Sethe and Abel, cut off from the sustaining, life-affirming traditions, myths, and rituals of communities held together by an ethic of love? Do they venture out to the confrontation with evil unarmed and unprepared? What would it mean to educate them for the confrontation? What would it mean to prepare them to run and to have the courage to step off the porch and go out of the yard?

It would not mean lessening in any way the ongoing effort to name injustice and struggle for justice. Schools should continue — redouble — efforts to address racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty and all other forms of institutionalized oppression. But the insights contained in novels like *House Made of Dawn* and *Beloved* as well as the tragic experience of Muslim Filipinos or the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing point to other approaches that might help children in their inevitable confrontation with the tragic. They point to the importance of acknowledging that "evil is, that evil is abroad in the night."<sup>36</sup> They point to the importance of stories of suffering and survival, to the power of myth, to the communion of ritual,

and to the importance of loving communities to enable children to “know it,” to know that “there is no defense,” and to have the courage to “go on out the yard.”<sup>37</sup> In short, they point to a dialectic of humility and hope akin to West’s prophetic pragmatism, a dialectic that may or may not be expressed in religious language. These stories suggest that we come to recognize that education is not *for* life — particularly not for a constrained, spiritually impoverished life of material consumption — but rather education *is* life, that it is part of the process of helping children, in community, creatively fashion meaningful lives.

Perhaps more controversially, arming children for their inevitable encounter with the tragic means understanding and respecting the fact that for many the confrontation will be encoded in and understood through the stories and myths and rituals of traditional religions. If we are to make good on West’s challenge to appreciate how the “wretched of the earth” cope with their situation in order to be in solidarity with them, then we cannot take Dewey’s path in counseling the “surrender the whole notion of special truths that are religious by their very nature.”<sup>38</sup> We must recognize that for many religion is an inhabited aesthetic; it is their response to the need to create a meaningful and fulfilling life in the face of the tragic.

Such recognition suggests the need for a careful, mutually critical relationship between education and religion, secular and sacred in ways that acknowledge the violence of the dichotomization of experience and eschew the temptation to dismiss any aspect of human experience as the exclusive domain of one institution or the other. It does not mean, however, breaching the wall of separation between church and state by allowing religion to dominate public education and civil society nor allowing secular perspectives to dominate. It means we might, like good neighbors, talk across the backyard fence about what we want and what each might contribute for the well being of *our* children. Such a conversation need not degenerate into the prescriptive monologue we rightly fear as a step toward indoctrination. It might lead to a renewed creativity in education that replaces the idolatrous commodity fetish at the heart of so much contemporary educational practice and reform with a sense of education as coming to fashion meaning in a participatory, aesthetic encounter which may or may not be religious. Thus it might highlight, and draw upon, the aesthetic impulse in human experience through a variety of creative expressions that would include the arts and religion as an inhabited aesthetic.

---

### Philosophy of Education in Their Presence

What might it mean to do philosophy of education in the presence of burning children, to engage in both critical and normative inquiry after the fashion of Momaday’s old men running after evil: in acknowledgement of the tragic and “deep in the channel?” How might philosophy of education go about informing a practice of education that takes seriously the tragic sense of life and recognizes the ubiquitousness of religious faith as a response to this reality?

## Teaching in the Presence of Burning Children

---

Recognizing that the tragic includes man made injustices the practice of philosophy of education in their presence would surely continue and strengthen the vital work of critical theorists, feminist theorists and others engaged in the vital task of uncovering and naming practices that continue to marginalize and oppress vulnerable communities. Recognizing the continuing importance of understanding the workings of the natural world and eschewing the too-comfortable absolutist truth claims of some religious perspectives, such a practice would surely continue to inquire into the relevance of scientific thought for education. It would surely also carry on with the critical interrogation and deconstruction of metanarratives, including religious ones. But after the critique, what? After the deconstruction, what?

Dewey's common faith rests in part on the recognition of the constructedness of social reality, hence it highlights the possibility — the responsibility — of cooperative transformation. West's prophetic pragmatism, on the other hand, reminds us of the continuing power of religious narratives in conceiving and motivating change as well as coping with failure. While the first tends to eschew traditional religion, the second embraces it. Both, however, are fundamentally aesthetic. Therefore, after the criticism and deconstruction there might come, not the reconstruction of new idols, but the re-weaving of meaning through a participatory aesthetic analogous to Baby Suggs' sermons in the clearing. This need not mean returning to the philosophical practice of claiming to discover and explain metanarratives about the true nature of reality. Nor does it mean surrendering criticism to faith, for the criticism represents an essential corrective that maintains the creative ferment, that prevents the turn to religious faith from settling into just another idolatrous metanarrative. Perhaps it means venturing beyond the empirical and philosophical questions that most often concern scholars of education to a more sustained inquiry into the aesthetics of education and a new balance of logos and mythos. It might also mean recognizing that in conceiving education as a process of helping children fashion meaningful and fulfilling lives in a flawed and tragic world, secular education and religious communities are in the same race. All those children on fire are *our* children.

Doing philosophy of education in the presence of burning children suggests that the field explore ways to participate in the re-weaving of meaning in ways that can inform education without either lapsing into an apologetics for a particular religious perspective or dismissing such perspectives out of hand. Such practice might raise any number of questions: What might it mean to acknowledge evil and the tragic sense of life in education? How might we go about fashioning a participatory aesthetic like Baby Suggs' clearing rituals that create communities in which individuals might learn to love like it was our business and ours alone? What would school curricula and practices look like that did not neglect science or the importance of getting along in the world yet at the same time fostered a religious attitude, whether expressed in traditional religion or not, toward the world

and people in it and a sense of the holy in both the immanent and transcendent?<sup>39</sup> How can we educate in ways that sustain and encourage faith — religious or not — without violating the constitutional separation of church and state?

There are, of course, contemporary philosophers of education who are revisiting the relationship between religious faith and education in insightful and creative ways. To borrow a metaphor from Momaday, the channel has been cut, but there is much work to be done by both secular and religious philosophers of education to deepen and widen it. In this way, philosophy and/of education might begin to answer the daunting challenge of Rabbi Greenberg's working principle and thus work to help public education acknowledge and respond to the tragic in ways that might be credible in the presence of burning children.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity After the Holocaust," in Eva Fleischer, ed., *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1977), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas K. Huneke, *The Stones Will Cry Out: Pastoral Reflections on the Shoah* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 21-22.

<sup>3</sup> Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 106.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "A tragedy, then, is an imitation. . ." Aristotle, *On Poetics*, 1449b 20.

<sup>6</sup> N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *The Republic*. trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 68-80; Aristotle, "On Poetics," in Mortimer J. Adler, ed., *Great Books of the Western World, Vol. 9* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 683-5.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 223-229; Douglas Smith, "Introduction," in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), xvi.

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Burbules, "The Tragic Sense of Education," *Teachers College Record* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1990): 469; Rene Vincente Arcilla, "Tragic Absolutism in Education," *Educational Theory*, 42, no. 4 (Fall 1992): 473-481.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 478.

<sup>11</sup> Megan Boler, "An Epoch of Difference: Hearing Voices in the Nineties," *Educational Theory* 50, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 357-8, 360.

<sup>12</sup> Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 228; See Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Dover Publications, 1954).

<sup>13</sup> Boler, *ibid.*, 358.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Benne, *Education for Tragedy: Essays in Disenchanted Hope for Modern Man* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), 1-36.

<sup>15</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938), 25-50.

<sup>16</sup> Benne, *ibid.*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1988).

## Teaching in the Presence of Burning Children

---

<sup>18</sup> It is important to acknowledge, however, that the central event of Morrison's novel, Sethe's murder of her daughter to prevent her enslavement, was based on an actual event. See Jan Furman, *Toni Morrison's Fiction* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 68.

<sup>19</sup> West, *American Evasion of Philosophy*, 233.

<sup>20</sup> Edward T. Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jeffrey Ayala Milligan, "Teaching Between the Cross and the Crescent Moon: Islamic Identity, Postcoloniality, and Public Education in the Southern Philippines," *Comparative Education Review*, in press.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>22</sup> See Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) and Jeffrey Ayala Milligan, "Religious Diversity, Education, and the Concept of Separation: Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?" *Philosophy of Education 2003* (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society/University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2004), in press.

<sup>23</sup> John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1934), 32-33.

<sup>24</sup> Cornel West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 108. See also West, *American Evasion of Philosophy*, 226.

<sup>25</sup> Momaday, *ibid.*; Morrison, *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Dewey, *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> See Roger Finke & Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

<sup>28</sup> John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 52.

<sup>29</sup> Dewey J. Hoitenga, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 186, 175-202.

<sup>30</sup> Hick, p. 54.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 11-12, 14 cited in Hick, 57-8.

<sup>32</sup> Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 17-18.

<sup>33</sup> West, *American Evasion*, 211-239.

<sup>34</sup> For example, David Purpel, Iris Yob, Ignacio Gotz, Nel Noddings, & Terence McLaughlin, among others.

<sup>35</sup> I Kings, 3:16-28, *King James Bible*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Momaday, *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Morrison, *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> West, *American Evasion*, *ibid.*; Dewey, *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> I am using here Dewey's sense of the religious attitude as signifying "something that is bound through imagination to a *general* attitude" that can be displayed in "art, science, and good citizenship." Dewey, *ibid.*, 23.