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WHAT IF EDUCATION IS NOT A RACE?:  
THE NEED WITHIN DEMOCRATIC LIFE TO SEE  
EDUCATION AS A PERSONAL, INTERPERSONAL, AND  
TRANSPERSONAL JOURNEY AND THE PRESENT  
POSSIBILITIES FOR HELPING THE PEOPLE TO SEE THIS

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The Foundation of Ethics and Meaning

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“*We are the ones we’ve been waiting for!*”

— Barack Obama, from Jim Wallis (the Epilogue to *God’s Politics*<sup>1</sup>),  
from the late Lisa Sullivan, a young African-American community  
organizer.

Recent issues of *The Journal of Teacher Education* have proposed that we would be well served to reconsider our basic models of education. Beyond seeing education as a path either to individual social success or to general social justice, we might see it more fundamentally as intended to help each of us find our personal, human way through life, and *through that* enabling us to live together collectively in more human ways.<sup>2</sup> These concerns echo those of the origins of Western philosophy, in Socrates’s concern that, though we understand to some extent how to train calves and colts—and, by implication, human beings whose lives are preoccupied with material consumption and mindless competition—we have no practical idea of what it means to educate free human beings and citizens who find their own individual and collective paths.<sup>3</sup>

This vision of education has deep relevance: if we see education—and life—most basically as the pursuit of happiness through a personal and collective journey toward wisdom, there are no “laggards” or “stragglers.” Life is not a race made only for the swift—in fact, an obsession with individual or collective speed, besides being dangerous to our psychic health, can keep us from seeing what lies along our way and who our traveling companions are. In this view, if any “remediation” in education exists, it has far more to do with the removal of blinders than with the application of spurs. Rather than valuing

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics: How the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It: A New Vision for Faith and Politics in America* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005), 373-374.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer A. Whitcomb, Hilda Borko, and Dan Liston, “Why Teach?” In *Journal of Teacher Education* 59:1, 3-9; “Why Teach?: Part II” 59:4, 267-272.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Apology* 20b; *Phaedrus* 227a, 279c, In *Collected Dialogues*. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Caird, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 6, 476, 525.

some “successful” lives over other “unsuccessful” ones, we learn to place the greatest educational, social, and political value in the wise conduct of *each* human life and the contact it enjoys with other life.

This vision also has deep relevance to our times in ways it is urgent for us as educators to make good on. With the historic presidential election of 2008, the imagination of our nation and the imagination of the world were galvanized in a way that they had not been for forty years by a political call to democratic community: “*We are the ones we’ve been waiting for!*” This call for us to remove our political blinders toward one another would seem to ask us also to remove our educational blinders, and it is a diabolical irony that the first educational policy to follow upon this call was named “Race to the Top.” But if we are going to seriously call the Obama Administration to task, we must *ourselves* be up to the task he earlier so movingly called us to. Obviously, just hearing the words “*We are the ones we’ve been waiting for*” is not nearly enough to get us to *find*—or even just to *seek to find*—ourselves and one another. We need an educational philosophy, educational institutions, and educational policies clearly devised for these things, and phrased in ways a democratic public that heard and responded to these words can understand.

While this is a task a bit beyond the scope of a short essay, what I will try to do here is to expand upon the idea broached by the editors of *JTE* in historical terms—in terms of a personal and a collective journey. The Obama/Duncan team thought all they needed to do to reverse the inane, banal policy of *No Child Left Behind* was to switch focus from the bottom to the top, leaving in place—and, in fact, emphasizing even more strongly—the notion that education is, in essence, an individual and collective *race*. When we replace the notion of a competitive race with the notion of an individual and collective journey, though, we find another, authentically educative, reversal of the Bush policy: *Each Child*—indeed, each person—should be sought to be *Drawn Forward* on a personal and collective journey toward personal and collective wisdom.

In what follows I will begin to outline what such a policy might mean first in personal then in philosophical terms. First, I will trace a bit of Obama’s own educational development: how he was first set on a personal educational journey and how, proceeding along with that journey, he eventually came to successfully elicit *us* to travel along with him on a similar, collective journey as a democratic people. Yet as a people, we clearly have only so far taken small steps along that journey since Obama’s election. We need a clearer vision of where it is we should be going than Obama himself has so far been able to provide. So, second, I will begin to trace some of the philosophical roots of Obama’s personal journey.

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“Let us treat the men and women as if they were real. Perhaps they are,” said Emerson in “Experience.”<sup>4</sup> Right now, we are seeking through our educational institutions to treat children—that is, *incipient* men and women—exclusively as measurable phenomena. We see them through their test scores and take these as signs of their eventual economic productivity. What would it take, educationally, to treat people as real? This is both a deeply philosophical and a deeply practical question. And it needs to be treated both philosophically and practically. To that end, in this second section, I will draw out some of the educational implications of Kant’s well-known but abstract distinction between transcendental moral *noumena* and instrumental *phenomena*, connecting this with Emerson’s injunction to “treat the people as if they were real” and with Obama’s educational and political journey. I will take the moral and political enjoinder to attempt to understand people as transcendental *noumena* rather than instrumental *phenomena*—as *real, animated, ensouled, journeying beings* rather than as mere behaviors, test scores and other idolatrous images of outward “success”—as the key to the transformation of education and of democracy that the Obama Administration may eventually usher in. But this will happen only if the educational community powerfully enjoins the elected to do so.

How did *Obama* find first himself, then others? How can *we* conceive this process generally, in philosophical terms? And how can we make this process pedagogically, institutionally, and politically *real*? If we, indeed, *are* the *ones* we’ve been waiting for, we need—it could not be clearer—to seriously ask ourselves all three of these questions and to dedicatedly seek answers to them in order for us *actually* to find ourselves and one another. In this essay, I will seek preliminary answers to the first two of these questions, leaving the all important third one for more substantial future work.<sup>5</sup>

#### STRANGERHOOD AND CITIZENSHIP: THE EDUCATION OF BARACK OBAMA

“You gave me my start in life.” Obama addressed these words to one of his teachers exactly a quarter century after he first enrolled in his classes in 1979. The teacher was Roger Boesche of Occidental College.<sup>6</sup> What *was* that “start,” the personal start that eventually gave us a collective start? Just what happened to Barack Obama educationally that became the seed for a possible new birth of democratic life—a new birth of freedom? If we can figure that out we might be far better able to serve as the midwives for that new birth, to help

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience.” In *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. William H. Gilman, ed. (New York: Signet Classic, 1965), 342.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey D. Wilhelm and Bruce Novak, *Literacy for Love and Wisdom: “Being the Book” and “Being the Change”* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011.)

<sup>6</sup> Roger Boesche, personal communication, September 2007.

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it actually come to term rather than become stillborn or aborted as it now is clearly threatening to do.

The classes were called “American Political Thought” and “Modern Political Thought.” Boesche has no record of just what was taught in them. At the time, though, he was starting work on a book entitled *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville*, the central chapters of which could well have served as a textbook for Obama’s campaign, though there is no indication he ever read them: “Freedom as Decentralization and Participation,” “Freedom as Interdependence: The Paradox of Personal Independence,” “Freedom as Self-Mastery: The Necessity of Culture,” “Freedom Preserved by Mores, not Laws,” and “Freedom as Overcoming Self-Interest: The Importance of a Sense of History.”<sup>7</sup>

I recently made a visit to Occidental College, sat in on a few of Boesche’s classes, and talked extensively with a number of his current students. They were attending an institution known for cultivating liberal social activism but found a different *kind* of “liberalism” in Boesche’s classroom: a liberalism *centering* on the interaction of free *beings*, rather than on the pursuit of social equality and economic justice. Most of the students I spoke to were also social activists of one kind or another, but what they found in Boesche’s classes—unlike any others they had taken—was the sense that the pursuit of abstract social goods was part of a human quest for shared *life* that they found uniquely encouraged and enacted in these classes, in the processes of reflection and dialogue they found there.

Tocqueville does not write a lot about education, but there are a few sentences from *Democracy in America* that seem to capture the gist of his educational philosophy:

One might say that sovereigns in our time seek only to make great things with people. I should want them to think a little more of making great people, to attach less value to the work and more to the worker... I should want to strive to give our contemporaries a vaster idea of themselves and of their species.<sup>8</sup>

What I heard from Boesche’s students reflects something of this, as do the life paths Obama himself took soon after leaving his classes, involving first a period of two years of intense personal reflection, then a period of three years of intense dialogical activism.

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<sup>7</sup> Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.)

<sup>8</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. (Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, tr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 672, 604.

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In 1981, Obama transferred from Occidental to Columbia, where, according to biographer David Mendell:

[h]e chose to live a monastic existence, spending time alone in his spare Manhattan apartment and digesting the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Herman Melville, and Toni Morrison, as well as the Christian Bible. “I had two plates, two towels,” Obama recalled. “My mother and sister, when they came to visit me, just made fun of me because I was so monklike. I had tons of books. I read everything. I think that was the period when I grew as much as I ever have intellectually. But it was a very internal growth.”<sup>9</sup>

After those two years were over, though, in 1983, he immediately enmeshed himself in the work as a community organizer that became the model and the symbol for his later political career.

This sudden complete turnaround in the tenor of Obama’s life could not be accidental. The epigraph to his autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*, clues us directly in to how these two seemingly deeply discordant periods are in fact closely connected: “*For we are strangers before them, and sojourners, as were all our fathers.*”<sup>10</sup> Seeing oneself as a mental traveler leads directly to seeing one’s life among others as enjoining the undertaking of a *common journey together*. To revert to Tocqueville’s terms, seeking “a vaster idea of ourselves” *leads* us to seek fellowship and community in ever larger forms, to realize the more communal and cosmic implications of our own being in the experience of *interbeing* and the “vast idea of our species” that that experience can bring.<sup>11</sup>

To understand just how it can lead us to do so—and to learn how to better translate the personal story of Obama’s “start in life” into a collective “new birth of freedom” we can turn that into educationally and politically—let us now turn to Emerson and a few of his philosophical ancestors and descendants.

#### PHENOMENA AND NOUMENA: THE RACE FOR OBJECTS VS THE SEARCH FOR HUMAN REALITY

According to Kant, “the human being... exists as an end in itself, not merely a means to be used by this or that will at [its] discretion... So act that

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<sup>9</sup> David Mendell, *Obama: From Promise to Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 59.

<sup>10</sup> Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), v. Originally published in 1995.

<sup>11</sup> I take the term “interbeing” from Thich Naht Hahn, *Interbeing* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1987.)

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you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.”<sup>12</sup> When we hear Tocqueville asking us to “attach less value to the work, and more to the worker” to put “making great people” above “making great things *with* people”; when we hear Boesche’s students valuing above all else the concern for reflection and dialogue demonstrated in his classes; and when we see Obama, immediately after taking those classes, first undergoing a period of sustained, intense, solitary reflection before undertaking a political life of sustained, intense, public dialogue—we are seeing this aspect of what Kant called “the metaphysics of morals” in pedagogical action. In a world in which so many forces converge to encourage us to see ourselves and others strictly as means, we need to be somehow *taught* to see ourselves and others as ends. Otherwise the human race turns itself into a rat race, into a collectivity constantly pursuing various trains of “objects” while disregarding ourselves and others as subjects, as ends in ourselves, rather than as means to endless trains of other ends.

The fundamental misconception of programs of democratic education that seeks to address only the “laggards,” “stragglers” and “children left behind” in a race without addressing the underlying conception of democratic education and democratic life *as* fundamentally a race is to miss the humanity of those being educated as human beings and induced into democratic life among their fellow beings. Notice, Kant does *not* say we need to always treat ourselves and one another *purely* as ends in ourselves, merely that we should *never* treat ourselves or others purely as *means* to outward ends. We must seek never to *forget* our own and others’ personhood, as we are often tempted to in pursuing outward objects. We must seek always to *remember* that beyond all our *doings* we are *beings*. This is the transcendental dimension of human experience, the “beyondness” of our being in the world: the moral being that must be recognized as both enmeshed with and lying beyond all pragmatic doing; the moral *noumena* of recognition that both is enmeshed with and lies beyond all cognitive *phenomena*.

How do we account for these things educationally? Learning to do so, we would take ourselves quite a long way toward assuring ourselves authentic life as human beings and as citizens. This is why pursuing the question of Obama’s educational “start in life” is so relevant to the question of our collective ability to pursue large-scale democratic renewal through his presidency even in the face of his own direct betrayal of that “start” in his first rendering of educational policy.

The Bush Administration put education first on its agenda and its policy was, in the simplest terms, to align our educational institutions with our

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<sup>12</sup> Cited in Paul Guyer, *Kant*. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 185-86.

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economic institutions: to measure a “gross educational product” with test scores similarly to the way we measure our “gross national product.” What Kant, Tocqueville and Boesche recommend is that we recognize in education, beyond the phenomenal realm of economics, the noumenal *human* realm that all of us need to be induced to join. They also indicate that there are clear standards for that realm—transcendental, human standards beyond economic, phenomenal ones—that we can seek to attain both as individuals and as peoples. They don’t deny the economic realm, or the need for measurement of either an economic or an educational “gross national product.” What they indicate is that beyond that realm—more important than it and more vital to our lives than it—there lies a moral realm that asks us to orient ourselves fundamentally, both as individuals and as peoples, not toward a “gross national product,” but toward what might be called a “great natal educt.”<sup>13</sup> As Tocqueville put it, we need to “attach less value to the work and more to the worker,” to make not just “great things[,] with people” as means, but “*great people*,” who live fundamentally for themselves and others, not *for* “things”: to teach people, not just to be good “employees” or “employers”—that is, literally, to be either proficiently *used* or proficient *users*.<sup>14</sup> More fundamentally than this, we need to learn to treat ourselves and one another as ends, to see the development of unique personhood and the development of fellowship among unique persons as both the fundamental end of education and the fundamental end of democratic life.

Obama could see that his own start in life was due to an education that recognized these things and immediately after that he sought, so deeply and strenuously, first his own internal development, then the development of democratic political communities. This provides us with the clue that the key elements of transcendental democratic education must be reflection and dialogue, conceived as the active recognition first of oneself, then of others, as ends in themselves. But it doesn’t tell us a whole lot more than that. Nor do Kant, Tocqueville, or Boesche have very much to say about transcendental democratic education and its connection to authentic democratic politics. There are others in the transcendental tradition who do, though, and we shall turn to them now.

As already noted, it was Emerson who put Kant’s categorical imperative into the most poignant educational terms. Following are the connected educational insights from the essay in which he does so:

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<sup>13</sup> “Natal” refers to Hannah Arendt’s understanding of the political and philosophical importance of “natality” in *The Human Condition*, “The Crisis in Education,” and *Thinking*.

<sup>14</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 604, 672.

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Where do we find ourselves? ... To find the journey's end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom... Since our office is with moments, let us husband them... Let us treat the men and women well: treat them as if they were real: perhaps they are... Without any shadow of doubt, amidst this vertigo of shows and politics, I settle myself ever firmer in the creed, that we should... do broad justice where we are, by whomsoever we deal with, accepting our actual companions and circumstances, however humble or odious, as the mystic officials to whom the universe has delegated its whole pleasure for us... Thus journeys the mighty Ideal before us... In liberated moments, we know that a new picture of life is already possible: the elements already exist in many minds around you, of a doctrine of life which shall transcend any written record we have... [T]he true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.

Emerson, "On Experience" (1844)<sup>15</sup>

Emerson's "perhaps they are" is not just a humorous touch; it is the key to the passage. We cannot know, cannot *cognize*, ourselves or others as *noumena*; we can *only* morally treat ourselves and others *as if* we and they *were* real, seeking to *recognize* rather than to *cognize* them. When we seek this, we morally enact a *concrete* idealism that differs both from traditional conceptual, theological metaphysics and from Cartesian, solipsistic metaphysics centered on the supposition that we are transparent to ourselves, even if nothing else is transparent to us. This is literally a metaphysics of moral demeanor, an enactment of the *choice* to *treat* ourselves and others as "mystic officials to whom the universe has delegated its whole pleasure to us."<sup>16</sup> We need, in other words, to seek to see ourselves and others, however "humble or odious" as the very "ones we've been waiting for." And to do this is to enact—"in liberated moments" when we indeed feel able to recognize ourselves and one another—our mutual redemption, the "true romance which the world exists to realize" in "the transformation of [personal] genius into [moral] power."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Emerson, *Selected Writings*, 334, 342, 349.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 349. In Kantian terminology, the "moral" and the "practical" are synonyms—and that Emerson is using the term "practical" in this sense is evident from the context.

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 “SEEK AND YE SHALL FIND”: THE POLITICS OF MEETING
 

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At the end of “The American Scholar,” Emerson indicated how this vision of morals could be translated into political terms: “A nation of [human beings] shall for the first time exist [when] each believes [themselves] inspired by the . . . Soul which inspires all.”<sup>18</sup> Lincoln began to imagine what this might look like in calling for “a new birth of freedom” in a “government of, by and [above all] *for* people” as ends in themselves that would manifest “malice toward none” and “charity for all.”<sup>19</sup>

The political slogan “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for” can be considered as the translation of these calls. In other work, I will examine the historical process through which they came to be translated.<sup>20</sup> Obama took this phrase from Jim Wallis, to whom he gave his notable address on faith and progressive politics that became a chapter in *The Audacity of Hope*.<sup>21</sup> Philosophically and theologically trained, Wallis helped Obama work in philosophical understandings of “hope in the beloved democratic community” derived from Royce and Marcel into his presidential campaign.<sup>22</sup>

It hardly seems accidental that Royce’s notion of the “beloved democratic community” and Marcel’s notion of a political ethics of hope were incorporated into the Obama campaign. But *we, now* need to formulate an *educational* campaign based on these ideas to make good on the hopes Obama aroused in us. We need to be carefully *taught* to be “our brother’s and our sister’s keeper,” to be carefully *taught* an ethic of choosing “hope in the unseen”—hearing the words is hardly enough.

As I write, in the summer of 2010, it is not a time of great optimism for major change. The economic picture is still dim. The political energy in the country seems to lie mostly with those who seek *regressive* rather than *progressive* change. Obama may lose his legislative majorities in November. On the surface, this hardly seems the time to be planning an idealistic educational revolution that neither the people nor their leaders currently have

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 245.

<sup>19</sup> Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1861-1865*. (New York: The Library of America), 586, 687.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce Novak, “Re-Awakening Hope in A Time of Cynicism, *Yet Again*: Obama’s Involvement in and Influence by the Politics of Meaning Movement, and Why Obama Needs to Revive that Movement for His Administration to Succeed.” In progress.

<sup>21</sup> Barack Obama, “Faith.” In *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. (New York: Crown, 2006), 195-226.

<sup>22</sup> Predominantly from Josiah Royce, *Hope of the Great Community* (New York: Macmillan, 1916) and Gabriel Marcel, “Sketch of a Phenomenology and Metaphysic of Hope.” In *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*. Emma Crauford, tr. (New York: Harper, 1962), 29-67.

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any impetus toward. Yet it is times such as these that reveal the *need* for the philosophy, and the need for deep, moral hope, to replace superficial optimism. Emerson, Royce, and Marcel each wrote with determined hope in times of despair. Most of Emerson's great essays were written in 1837 in the years immediately following the worst economic downturn in American history during the laughable presidency of Martin van Buren. Royce and Marcel each wrote their great essays on hope in the depths of World Wars: Royce in 1916, Marcel in 1942.

If "we *are* the ones we've been waiting for," it is we who need to act to find ourselves and one another. It is *we* who need to *treat* ourselves and one another "as if we were real"; and it is only by doing so that we will discover whether we are or not. The forces that brought people to listen to and to vote for Obama, the forces that awakened the people in the election of 2008, are still alive, waiting to be evoked. Whatever happens to the Obama administration, the Obama *election* can continue to be seen in the way Kant saw the French Revolution, even after its decline, as a fundamentally transformative political experience "that points to the disposition and capacity of human beings toward being the cause of their own advance toward the better" through "genuine enthusiasm that always moves toward what is ideal... and cannot be grafted onto self-interest."<sup>23</sup>

It is up to us to keep hope alive. If we do so, hope will rise again, even if it finds itself trampled on in the near term.

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<sup>23</sup> Immanuel Kant, "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?" (1798), in *On History*. Lewis White Beck, ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 142, 145.

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