ROOT METAPHORS, PARADIGM SHIFTS, AND DEMOCRATICALLY SHARED VALUES: COMMUNITY SERVICE-LEARNING AS A BRIDGE-BUILDING ENDEAVOR

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ROOT METAPHORS AND THE MUNDANE

In 1942 Stephen Pepper published a not-so-little book entitled World Hypothesis: A Study in Evidence certainly an unlikely starting point for an essay on community service-learning (CSL). However, my contention is that Pepper’s discussion points to a rather important and oft-overlooked “place” that CSL can take us when understood and practiced as a pedagogy that goes beyond the watered-down, vanilla, meaningless “activism” or the even worse “advertising schemes” often characteristic of CSL courses. In this essay, I will make the argument that CSL can grow new root metaphors and encourage paradigmatic shifts and in so doing build communities of shared interests, repair broken bridges, and erect new ones.

In World Hypothesis and elsewhere, Pepper argues that historically important philosophical systems philosophical “isms,” as my students and I talk about them become unrestricted worldviews through a complicated process by which commonsense experience is rationalized via metaphor, and that all worldviews fall into five general categories: formism, mechanism, organicism, contextualism, and selectivism. According to Pepper, the root metaphor method of understanding commonsense experience evolves when

A man desiring to understand the world looks about for a clue to its comprehension. He pitches upon some area of common-sense fact and tries if he cannot understand other areas in terms of this one. This original area becomes then his basic analogy or root metaphor. He describes as best he can the characteristics of this area, or, if you will, discriminates its structure. A list of its structural characteristics becomes his basic concepts of explanation and description.1

Certainly Pepper’s most valuable contribution to philosophy is a meta-philosophical one that is, his description of how philosophical systems might be born and evolve and be categorized and ultimately understood has impacted philosophy in valuable ways for the last sixty-five years; however, for the purposes of this essay, it is the implications Pepper’s theory has for the more mundane, everyday, commonsense understanding of human experience that is most important.

In Pepper’s contribution to The Dictionary of the History of Ideas, he argues that the implications of the root metaphor theory do not stop at the
philosopher’s doorstep but permeate all of human understanding: “Not only are the great traditional systems caught up in the action of metaphorical interpretations, but the cultural concepts and institutions dominating the beliefs and values of ordinary men are impregnated with them.”\(^2\) Additionally, Thomas Kuhn’s important work in the philosophy of science further bolsters Pepper’s notion that developing and then relying on root metaphors is how humans make sense of experience and it is only in reconstructing those root metaphors that we can explain experiential anomalies and come to new and ever more valuable perspectives on our lived experience.\(^3\) That is, root metaphors or, if you will, paradigms, can direct us to understand mundane human experience (as well as the less mundane discoveries in, for example, physics) in new and differing ways; in a very important sense, growing new root metaphors or developing new paradigms relates directly to the possibility of individual and social progress particularly via educational practice.

I have come to several conclusions about Pepper’s thinking in regard to understanding our democracy metaphorically (particularly so after being asked to “teach” multicultural education in not one, but two college interviews, as well as in foundations courses as a professor since those interviews). Firstly, I think that Pepper was correct: we do have worldviews that grow out of root metaphors and are at least partially the basis for assigning meaning to and interpreting events in our everyday, mundane experiences except when one, mundane, democratic, multicultural experiences being, in the end, the most important ones.\(^4\) Secondly, I am convinced that those metaphorical understandings which direct our perceptions of mundane experience can and must be periodically regrown, restructured, or shifted depending on how well they do or do not explain and direct our experiences. Thirdly, and, despite what I initially thought regarding the triteness of such metaphors as the melting pot, tossed salad, and tapestry for understanding democracy and teaching in a multicultural society such as ours, I have now concluded that these three specific metaphors do, in fact, constitute important, albeit restricted, “root metaphors” for understanding and directing our actions within our particularly diverse democracy. In fact, as I will argue below, I think that these three metaphors represent historically important metaphorical changes in the American worldview of diversity and democracy. Finally, and coming out of my experiences with both community service-learning practice and philosophy, I believe that sound community service-learning can be a vehicle for examining and recreating our metaphorical visions for a democracy that is in dire need of reconnection.

**Historically Important Metaphors for American Diversity:**

**The Melting Pot, the Tossed Salad, and the Tapestry**

Each of these metaphors represents, in its own way, how American democratic diversity has been, is, and might be viewed, and I find them particularly important to future American teachers especially so for those
who will engage in community service-learning projects as part of their teaching. Before getting to the specifics of each, however, I want us to remember that as Seymour Lipsett argued in *American Exceptionalism*, we Americans see things through a very different lens than most of the rest of the world because we are not held together by a common binding birthright history, but rather, by the idea of democracy.\(^5\) Furthermore, democracy as we generally see it is not simply a system of governance, but permeates every aspect of our lives. As John Dewey famously said, “a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.”\(^6\) That being the case, I believe that these three metaphors rise to the level of restricted root metaphor or, in terms of Kuhn’s paradigms, to a kind of social paradigm in that they direct our thinking about our diverse democracy, and therefore, our actions in lived experience.

The first of these metaphors, historically speaking, is the melting pot or as I describe it, the Anglo-assimilationist metaphor. In this metaphor for democracy, the key term is “assimilate.” That is, we expected newcomers (old comers as well) to “be absorbed into the cultural tradition of the United States and in so doing to leave off most, if not all, of their own cultural identity.”\(^7\) The (s)melting pot metaphor has been with us at least since 1845 when Ralph Waldo Emerson first described our nation as a “smelting pot” and was reintroduced in 1908 by Israel Zangwell who called America, “the great Melting-Pot, where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming!”\(^8\) This Anglo-assimilationist perspective remained the root metaphor for the workings of American democracy for a very long time. It was not until the culture wars that began as early as the late 1940s, that we see a paradigmatic/root metaphor shift begin as our historically oppressed developed a voice and a political will and were availed the political means to act on that will and that voice.

The shift in thinking that brought us to and through the culture wars of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s is manifested in the second metaphor, that of the tossed salad or, as I call it, the pluralist perspective wherein “members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain an autonomous participation in and development of their traditional culture or special interest within the confines of a common civilization.”\(^9\) This metaphor is still rather current and it is telling that when I ask my students which of the three metaphors they believe is most fitting to present social conditions, this one wins out nearly unanimously. We do very much think of our national selves in this manner and for the most part we think this is a perfectly moral way of metaphorically understanding our immigrant heritage and our democratic relationships.\(^10\)

Certainly, in some ways, the salad bowl metaphor is an improvement over the homogenization found with the (s)melting pot metaphor. I often ask my students, however, if any of them dislike tomatoes or maybe black olives, or for that matter, the all-important lettuce, and invariably most do have something they would not include in their salad, and when I ask them what they might do upon getting a salad at a restaurant containing the tomatoes they
detest, they answer with “well, I just pick them out so I don’t have to eat them.” Some of my students “get it” and many others do not the danger of a well-entrenched, taken-for-granted root metaphor.11

The third of the metaphors that I will discuss here is that of the tapestry and I must admit that this one has taken me awhile to work through partially because I had, until relatively recently, bought into that well-entrenched paradigm of the tossed salad and did not fully understand the power of shifting root metaphors. However, the more I have pondered the idea the more interesting it has become and I have come to call the tapestry metaphor the democratic pluralist perspective and now define it as

a state of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain participation in and development of their traditional culture or special interest while fully participating in democratic decision making through democratic institutions thereby maintaining or creating democratic connections amongst and between those groups.12

That is, our continually shifting diversity, when seen within a democratic notion that protects cultural heritage/lifestyle differences while simultaneously obliging us to work together within cross-cultural communities of interest via democratic traditions, practices, and institutions making democratic connections can produce an “artful,” even beautiful, social context wherein our differences are woven together via our democracy-in-practice: a beautiful democratic tapestry. When I ask my students what they think of this shift in perspective (after a collective groan over my description of us creating something “beautiful”), they often have a bit of a “eureka” moment. I suggest to them that this metaphor, though certainly not perfect, takes into account that ethical concern over leaving the tomatoes out while simultaneously and specifically incorporating democracy…and my students’ response: “it’s a nice idea Dr. Sheffield, but it simply does not match what is really going on…nor will it ever.”

A Failing Metaphor: Signs of the Times

My reaction to the jadedness of my students prior to running across Pepper’s discussion of root metaphors and re-visiting the Kuhnian notion of paradigm shifts may have been some sort of despondency or general sadness at my students inability to see a future where all of our citizens are connected in important ways. However, I think my students’ source of hopelessness can be found in seeing our democratic undertaking as a tossed salad over the course of a generation or two and not being able, quite yet, to make that shift in metaphorical perspective that I now believe is necessary to reconstruct and reinvigorate our democracy. I also want to make it clear that though the tapestry metaphor is about reconnecting and working together it does not mean eliminating difference nor does it ignore the necessity of conflict. I have been
increasingly concerned over the last several years to hear my students, our future schoolteachers, say that it is not for them to engage their students in contentious discussions. This, I believe, is a result of failing metaphors: the melting pot entails oppression, and the salad bowl champions disconnection/avoidance, and neither provides the basis for a democratic classroom.

I also believe that we are at a place in our history when just such a metaphorical shift is “ripe for the picking.” Signs abound that our tossed salad paradigm of separation is reeking some not so metaphorical havoc: red states versus blue, the explosive growth in gated communities, Robert Putnam’s finding that we increasingly “bowl alone,” the current turmoil surrounding immigration, growing religious intolerance, and economic segregation all point directly back to the now-barren notion that we can hold our democracy together if we just remember that we are all in this salad together but there really is nothing in this salad to hold us together and so we justify our democratic disconnection in the name of personal freedom. We celebrate difference over commonality, and we talk the language of fear rather than friendship.

Kuhn writes about anomalies in science and Pepper talks about “concepts that become empty abstractions” when they lose their “connection” to the root metaphor; both seem to be happening and both call for a shift in thinking. Shifting to a new paradigm or developing a new root metaphor can be painful indeed. We who have worked under the prevailing pluralistic root metaphor find it very difficult to find a new way of seeing ourselves outside of that prevailing metaphor. Kuhn describes the anguish that the old guard of scientists feel as they try to the bitter end to hold onto the prevailing, yet failing paradigmatic perspective. Educational conferences increasingly focus on themes such as “progress” and “building communities of interest,” both of which have everything to do with how we understand our national selves in a demographically shifting and disconnected, stagnant democracy.

I recently had a student say that he thought we spent so much time focusing on those tossed-salad differences that we, in fact, emphasize difference over what we have in common our shared communities of interest and in doing so, miss the whole point of our diversity. My initial reaction was that old tossed-salad reply that “yes, but those tomatoes have been marginalized for generations and it is important to remember that and celebrate their cultural heritage.” Upon further reflection, I think my student may be right: my root metaphorical understanding of our diversity simply no longer serves my needs. The tossed salad metaphor, it seems to me, has led us to see democracy as a simple exercise in voting (if even that), rather than a process of conscientious connection with strangers.

Maybe the most disturbing sign of our current habit of separation is the re-segregation of our public school system. Without much notice and in the
absence of such programs as forced bussing, our public schools have become more segregated now than at any time since the landmark Brown versus Board of Education decision half a century ago. In his most recent study of American public schools, Jonathan Kozol argues that through divisive funding formulas we are quickly creating an “apartheid” system of schooling that, in turn, drives the growth of segregation broadly. Quoting Civil Rights Project research done at Harvard University, Kozol writes,

“At the beginning of the twenty first century,” according to Professor Gary Orfield, “American public schools are now 12 years into the process of continuous segregation. The desegregation of black students, which increased continuously from the 1950’s to the late 1980’s, has now receded to levels not seen in three decades...During the 1990’s, the proportion of black students in majority white schools has decreased to a level lower than in any year since 1968...almost three fourths of black and Latino students attend schools that are predominantly minority,” and more than two million, including more than a quarter of black students in the Northeast and Midwest, “attend schools which we call apartheid schools” in which 99 to 100 percent of students are nonwhite.

All of the above are evidence of a growing sense of social isolation, separation, and disconnection in our country, and I believe that at the core of these growing undemocratic sentiments, practices, and demographic facts is an overriding root metaphor that is not allowing us to get beyond seeing ourselves as fundamentally different, to understanding our fundamental similarity. The policies and practices of separation in operation today can be and are justified, at least in part, because we have come to see our national selves as metaphorically isolated fruits and vegetables afraid of democratic connection, conflict, and compromise. If not for the possibility of a metaphorical/paradigmatic shift, our very democracy might well be doomed, and I believe that the most important institution for overcoming our growing sense of alienation and for restructuring our democratic root metaphor is our system of public schools, and more particularly, the pedagogy of community service-learning.

COMMUNITY SERVICE-LEARNING AS A METAPHOR-GROWING PEDAGOGY: BUILDING BRIDGES

Put very briefly, community service-learning is a pedagogy wherein students take their classroom learned skills and knowledge into a community to solve community problems. CSL is, when based on sound philosophical conceptions, the epitome of democratic education. Its democratic nature is tied most closely to the understanding of community service that it entails, and it is in that understanding that the potential for growing new root metaphors and/or shifting old paradigms can be found. For the CSL pedagogy to accomplish the
metaphorical shift that I suspect it can (a move away from the tossed salad toward the tapestry), it must entail several important democratic characteristics: reflective deliberation, social activism, informed decision making, nondiscrimination, and nonrepression.

These first three characteristics of democratic education suggested here are inextricably tied together and form the foundation of democracy as a “tapestry” affair. Democracy obliges public education to produce citizens who are reflective and who know how to deliberate and are willing to deliberate with those who are “strangers;” additionally, democracy demands that public education develops citizens who are generally well-informed and who know how to stay informed; finally, democracy demands that public education aid in creating citizens who are willing to act on informed, reflective-deliberative decisions. These characteristics, I believe, constitute the tapestry understanding of our democratic diversity as one that obliges citizens to democratic participation (as indicated in the earlier definition of democratic pluralism). And, I believe, CSL is a pedagogy that provides just these democratic sensibilities for student, teacher, and community.

Amy Gutmann reminds us of two necessary additions to a sound theory of democratic education and, I suggest, they are key vehicles to restructuring our root metaphors: nonrepression and nondiscrimination. Nonrepression and nondiscrimination are crucial because they provide the means for diverse voices to enter into the democratic debate while maintaining their own cultural identity. In explaining what she means by nonrepression, Gutmann says

The principle of nonrepression prevents the state, and any group within it, from using education to restrict rational deliberation of competing conceptions of the good life and the good society. Nonrepression is therefore compatible with the use of education to inculcate those character traits, such as honesty, religious toleration, and mutual respect for persons, that serve as foundations for rational deliberation of differing ways of life. Because conscious social reproduction is the primary ideal of democratic education, communities must be prevented from using education to stifle rational deliberation of competing conceptions of the good life and the good society. Nonrepression, on this count, makes true democratic deliberation and action possible and certainly provides the possibility of seeing our democracy as a tapestry.

The second important addition Gutmann makes to democratic educational theory that supports the development of a metaphorical shift in understanding is her idea of nondiscrimination. An explicit public concept of nondiscrimination can at least minimize the marginalizing of minority groups by demanding that everyone have access to the thoroughgoing democratic
education that is necessary for democracy’s successful operation (particularly when seen as a tapestry). It is, as such, a logical extension of nonrepression:

In its most general application to education, nondiscrimination prevents the state, and all groups within it, from denying anyone an educational good on grounds irrelevant to the legitimate social purpose of that good. Applied to those forms of education necessary to prepare children for future citizenship (participation in conscious social reproduction), the nondiscrimination principle becomes a principle of nonexclusion.28

With the explicit “rules” of nonrepression and nondiscrimination added to the general characteristics of a democratically educated person, viable and vibrant forms of public education such as service-learning can promote shifts in our metaphorical understandings, thereby creating the availability for change in practice. However, the development and protections called for in CSL ultimately turn on how community service is understood and practiced within these democratic characteristics and constraints.

In his important book, Community Service: Encounter with Strangers, Howard Radest clarifies three components of community service that can make it a practice grounded in moral democracy: mutuality, solidarity, and diversity. Mutuality is the somewhat common understanding that in any community service activity there really exists no line between doer and done-to. That is, those “doing” the service are in at least as much need as those “receiving” the service and those roles might be reversed in a heartbeat — there exists mutual need.

Mutuality, however, cannot completely explain the moral implications of community service nor community service-learning. In fact, mutuality left to its self develops at worst into a melting-pot, bridge-destroying, oppressive service that maintains rather than blurs the line between doer and done-to and at best evolves into what Radest calls “boundaried mutuality” or what I would describe as tossed-salad community service:

By itself, mutuality tempts us to universalize the interpersonal. In the encounter with strangers, it relies on the knowledge that an exchange of positions between doer and done-to is always in order. In the exchange, I remain myself and yet the other becomes an actual person for me. But, any attempt to turn this exchange of positions into an exchange with “everyone” as if they were an “each-one” turns out to be impossible.

Ironically, under conditions of the lost connection — the crisis of community is one way we speak about it — a boundaried mutuality appears as a resurrection of tribalism. But because real tribes are just about gone, boundaried mutuality is only arbitrary. In a world of artificially resurrected tribalisms made ordinary, community
service is simply unnecessary. On one hand, people living in the public world of a democracy of agreements are told to help themselves in a competition for goods. On the other, in a reminder of nineteenth-century mutual aid societies, people are advised to turn for service to self-help groups, to “people like us.”

Because community service conceived as mutuality-only ultimately divides rather than connects, Radest suggests the additional concepts of “solidarity” and “otherness.” Solidarity is “the name of my relationship to the stranger who remains unknown only a person in an abstract sense but who is, like me, a human being. Solidarity is then a preparation for the future and at the same time a grounding in the present.” Both mutuality and solidarity rely ultimately on his third democratic criterion, “otherness.” This “otherness” is, according to Radest, a matter of choosings and not just of inheritings. Indeed, these choosings now extend to matters once thought inherited like family and faith. Separation from the tribe today is usual we are, as we say, a mobile society and religious experiment is usual too. Unlike Abraham, we do not need to “break the idols” of the tribe in order to find our way from faith to faith. The domination of functionalism is, in this context, a defense against this confusion and so against otherness. The virtues of function are standardization, routine, regularity, dependability. Above all there can be no surprises. Otherness as the opposite of these is both exciting and frightening. The encounter between confusion and dependability makes a cause out of otherness to which we give the name, “diversity.” The issue of diversity, however, is not simply one of race or class or caste and the resolution of the issue is not simply one of inclusion, toleration and appreciation. Community service in meeting the conditions of diversity initiates us into the organized practice of otherness. Above all, like art and like vocation, it denies the temptation to “remain at home.”

Seen in this way, democratic community service, and by extension, CSL projects that are based on this understanding, are bridge-building, connective endeavors that come out of and return in support of the tapestry metaphor of American diversity and democracy. CSL, when practiced with a sound philosophical understanding of democratic service, can shift metaphorical understandings and in doing so can change the mundane, daily interpretations of our national life for the better: we can reconnect; we can build bridges; we can see ourselves in a common struggle to make all our lives more just and happy.

Finally, Radest makes an important distinction between community service as a response to a crisis and as normal, “ordinary,” mundane, democratic habits of behavior. And though he indicates that conceiving
community service as “ordinary” might be utopian, he argues that community
service as a reaction to crisis, makes it impossible to shift our metaphorical
understandings of ourselves from disconnected pieces of a tossed salad to a
democratically inter-twined tapestry of association and support:

Community service would appear differently if it was conceived
under conditions of ordinariness. We would simply be “of service”
to each other, be for each other and not require the inducement of
danger. But, crisis itself has become ordinary in a world so given to
inequalities, to gaps between what is and what is desirable, to
failures of response, to blindness and deafness not only to others
but to one’s self.

I am trying to avoid the delusions of crisis become routine. Yet,
this routine is precisely what the bounded and momentary nature of
community serve programs acknowledges. In a sense, the doer
knows that he or she is doing something and yet, that really doing
something—bridging the gulf between doer and done-to is not on
the agenda.32

Conclusion

I began this paper claiming that community service-learning projects in
schools and universities, if done well, might very well take us all of us to
important new places. Under the above conception of community service and
democratic education more generally, I think CSL projects in schools and
universities can take us to the most important place: a new root metaphor for
American Democracy…one of connection, conflict, and compromise. As with
any new metaphorical understanding of the world, the shift will certainly be
slow and difficult. However, it is the nature of CSL as understood here to break
down the barriers of isolation and create connections and relationships across
pluralistic communities; to be a bridge-building pedagogy; to create democratic
beauty via establishing important, though contentious, relationships. Successful
community service-learning grows from the understanding that our democracy
cannot survive as a tossed salad while simultaneously weaving its own, new, root metaphor: that of the tapestry.

Notes

1. Stephen C. Pepper, World Hypothesis: A Study in Evidence (Los Angeles:
University of California Press, 1942), 92.


4. I make this claim based partially on Charles Taylor’s discussion of “recognition” and “identity” as political notions in the development of “self” with particular regard to multicultural identity in a multi-ethnic democracy such as that found in Canada and the United States. Taylor’s insights are valuable though space limits the discussion of his work here. I suggest reading his piece “The Politics of Recognition,” in Multiculturalism and The Politics of Recognition, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 75[4]106.


10. Once again, Taylor’s work is important here as it is from within this “salad bowl” metaphorical understanding that he raises vital questions about recognition and identity within a notion of universal equality. I would argue that to a large extent, the final metaphor of the tapestry takes Taylor’s concerns into account.

11. As William Kymlicka and Wayne Norman point out, even political philosophers have only in the last ten years or so begun to seriously consider the relationship between individual minority groups and their relationship to democracy: “The last ten years have witnessed a remarkable upsurge of interest in two topics amongst political philosophers: the rights and status of ethnocultural minorities in multi-ethnic societies (the “minority rights-multiculturalism” debate), and the virtues, practices, and responsibilities of democratic citizenship (the “citizenship-civic virtue” debate). To a surprising extent, these two debates have developed independently of one another, with only a few isolated discussions of their interconnection.” Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman, “Citizenship in Culturally Diverse Societies: Issues, Context, and Concepts,” in Citizenship in Diverse Societies, eds. Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1[4]41.


13. For evidence, see results of the two most recent presidential elections.


22. The 2006 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education annual conference theme.

23. Another point implicit in Charles Taylor’s work.


26. Numerous other scholars have described these democratic characteristics in different ways. Robert Bellah, for example, calls them democratic “habits of the heart” (Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, eds., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985)). My discussion represents just one of many ways to categorize such characteristics.


28. Ibid., 45.


30. Ibid., 183.
31. Ibid., 187.

32. Ibid., 177.