

Come, I Will Walk With You

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Abstract

A cancer diagnosis enlivens the question of what it means to live well with the Earth and its multidimensional beings, including the children I teach. A cancer diagnosis provides a necessary push to step out from the confines of a self and toward and into the wild fray of this life. I interpret my lived experiences through the practical philosophy of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics has helped me perform and write my lived experience, which I hope will draw in readers and listeners to a recognition of their inescapable ecological interdependence. Cultivating an ability to listen and interpret the world and the human and more-than-human kinships is important to me. Listening to words that children speak helps me learn to be open to the fullness of life, how life is lived, how life can be remembered and suffered and let go. I am gathering sense of being in the world and of understanding the offering that arrives when I nurture a commitment to care for the Earth.

Fáilte. A Warm Welcome to the Reader.

Fáilte. This work honors my grandmother who has walked this world with me in spirit since I was born. Lee Maracle (2002), a member of the Stó:lō Nation, who died November 11, 2021, writes, “Grandmothers are doorways to different points of view” (p. 69). Kathleen Mary McCabe was born in Ireland on August 4, 1898, and I knew she had died the day I saw my dad crying out by the tomato plants in 1980. My days with her were mostly spent at the water’s edge. I still see Granny and her daughters laughing and basking in the sun as I played nearby with a sand pail and diggers. I still feel her small home at the end of the cul-de-sac in Donnycarney, on the North side of Dublin. There she gave birth, cooked, and read the Sunday papers. I often wondered if she ever got a good night’s rest. At the age of 20, I went to Ireland to sit at her grave with its dust and cement. The summer day was hot and the soil dry and cracked. I sat for some time letting her laughter, the serious expression she wore when she saw trouble coming, her length of stride, and the stories about her, settle inside me.

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Writing these opening words helps me unforget that I am of that dry, cracked soil *and* of my grandmother’s bone and breath. I know my connection to my grandmother is more than blood quantum. Reflecting on that day by her grave, I deepen my understanding of my journey as I struggle to learn how to experience presence and to attend to how I am being invited to listen, see, and feel the Earth and all its inhabitants, in all those (artificial) spaces of past, present, and future. Yet I have been fortunate to have been gifted moments of presence and connection to Earth on my pedagogical journey, moments I share with you now.

As I engage in the writing that follows, I am cognizant of the risk of objectifying things and enforcing dichotomies. I find it challenging to move beyond the subject/object grammars of the language I have been taught and the histories I have experienced. Reengaging with my writing, returning again and again, I learn to recognize that choice of wording can point to hidden and not-so-hidden mis/understandings. Hermeneutics encourages me to see that such mis/understandings are invitations for scrutiny. Consider my sentence above: *At the age of 20, I went to Ireland to sit at her grave with its dust and cement.* I marked the gravesite as an “it.” There is objectification and distance implied even while I am sitting nearby. As Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013a) states, “we ‘it’ what we don’t understand” (Vimeo, 33:13). The gravesite becomes the “it” of my attention and I layer upon that “it” the loneliness and longing I feel for my grandmother. Sitting longer, words and memories are released, experiences, feelings, recognitions arise, illuminating what I have yet to notice.

As a hermeneutic inquirer, Martin Buber’s (1937) discussion of *I and Thou* helps me make sense of the confusions I feel when encountering the dichotomies and objectifications that shape my life and writing. He reminds me that “we live in the currents of universal reciprocity” (p. 67). He writes:

Once the sentence “I see [the grave¹]” has been pronounced in such a way that it no longer relates a relation between human I and a [grave] You ... the basic word I-It, *the word of separation* [emphasis added], has been spoken. (p. 75)

It is worth repeating, that in the original sentence I wrote, I failed, as Kimmerer says, *to understand*. When I “it” something it becomes rigid and broken from my relation to it. The potential for me to find places of appreciation, respect, and reciprocity are diminished. My reading of Buber attends to the liminal space of relationship and connection, *co-created* and full of presence; a presence that confronts me.

As I practice presence, “I-It” has the potential to be newly understood as “I-Thou” (p. 8); a recognition of the interconnections between myself and the human and more-than-human. Buber’s word *I-Thou* invites me to see the cracked earth of my grandmother’s grave not as a “thing among things” (p. 8) but as a living entity, a gift, within an interconnected world of human and more-than-human relations. Such a reading of Buber resonates within Kimmerer (2013b): “A great longing is upon us, to live again in a world made of gifts. I can scent it coming, like the fragrance of ripening strawberries rising on the breeze” (p. 32).

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Roots of my understanding of the world of relations began to lengthen. Roughly 10 years ago, I was sitting in a sunny spot in my home reading David Jardine’s (2012) *Pedagogy Left in Peace: Cultivating Free Spaces in Teaching and Learning*. I read throughout the day as the sun shifted from east to west. His words resonated the sense of fragmentation I had been feeling in my teaching/life. Had I been cut out for the work of teaching at all? Throughout the chapters I felt heard and seen and thus began a reinvigoration of my work with children. With no thought of receiving a response, I wrote to David and told him how I appreciated his words. His weave of Buddhist philosophy, Gadamerian hermeneutic philosophy, and ecology, brought new energy to my inquiry into my life of teaching. He wrote back—and again and again—and so, my practice of hermeneutic pedagogy was born.

The study of hermeneutics offers a walking stick, a gift from a windstorm, that helps me navigate familiar routes of uncertainty and risk that comes with the ever-changing living and teaching of young children. Learning that “suffering and impermanence” (Jardine, 2014, p. 162) *are* life, has given me a sense of calm to weather the confusions and uncertainties that followed these last 10 years. Hermeneutics invites spiraling inquiries of return to moments that call me to attention, again and again, learning something anew. Hermeneutics has given me the heartfulness needed to celebrate what Hannah Arendt (1958) called “natality: the fact that we have all come into the world by being born and that this world is constantly renewed through birth” (p. 196). As am I, again and again. Hermeneutic pedagogy helped me feel the wondrous beauty of the world and later, the gifts that come from the openings that cancer can bring.

Hermeneutics does not offer explanations, conclusions, nor lesson plans. Instead, hermeneutic pedagogy invites me to note ephemeral opportunities for stillness and how I might attend to and care for the living fields of relations to which I am connected. Each encounter of interconnection became one of the action sites for curriculum I began to explore with children. Having undergone the experience of cancer, I knew how important it was for me to face the fact that death was with every breath—each and every breath. Thus, hermeneutics has been put to work in my research through which curiosities, offerings, moments of encounter, and inquiry arise.

Inquiries arose as I walked with children and my growing awareness of how to listen and look with wonder. What follows is an expression of how I learned to listen, remember, suffer, and let go. I hope the reader will notice, connect to, or resonate with these research engagements that this found poem points us to thinking about together:

The stories we tell
about scraped knees
or pillbugs
or cancers
or silent screams
are living paths
we dance
and help to shape
We are one another’s world.

Once I was asked what I might say to a person who asked, “How can you teach me about this work?” My heart-response was, *Come, I will walk with you*. My practical response is to tell you to wear something light on your feet and be prepared to stop along the way; wear something that can be slipped off easily when the moist, soft, ground beckons.

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Stories pick me up in their kaleidoscopic whorl of twists and turns, their patterns and geometry. Stories are in me. Stories carry me away. Living as a woman, teacher, mother, lover, friend—and the list can go on just as it does in you—is complex, daunting, and mysterious. One thread tugs on another in shifting geometries, perspectives, and choices of action. Being swept away in the arms of a story isn't always good, even if it's my own. I bear witness to these stories, unravel them, and sometimes leap out of some of the tangles they bring. It is not always easy because the stories are part of my skin.

Curled by the fire with my laptop or staring out a snow-patterned window, I find it challenging to imagine you, the reader, reading this work. I can't see you or hear you—or touch you, or weep with you. I imagine us, though. I draw on memories of conversations along winding forest walks, dinner gatherings, and conference discussions. “The word becomes binding, as it were: it binds one human being with another. This occurs whenever we speak to one another and really enter into genuine dialogue with another” (Gadamer, 2002, p. 106).

I know that without you this story is silent. Stay with me now. The cast iron wood stove, filled with last year's labor of chopping and stacking, will keep us company. Put on the kettle and let's have a cup of tea.



Fig. 1: Stacked wood

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I am learning to make sense of things that show themselves sometimes so fleetingly that I am left gasping and grasping. I ask, *How can I learn to walk without tripping over myself? How can I learn to walk with grace?*

The Greek god-nymph Hermes, born of the god Zeus and the nymph Maia, from whom the practice of hermeneutics is derived, served as a messenger between the gods and mortals, between what is foretold and what is learned. He (she? they?) is the *in-between*. Hermes' job was to keep the gates open, so that

a portal to new learning might be possible. Just when I *think* I have the (right) way that will help me understand my actions or the children or the students I teach, something arises to turn me upside down. Hermes is a trickster.

Hermeneutic inquiry, which I enact in my research, requires that I go *through* landscapes and seascapes of challenges and dangers. It's the kind of risk that I feel, with my whole body. Hermeneutics asks me to face the important questions that come from such a meeting. What is going on here? How did I end up in this place? The words that come begin to set down paths for walking.

It is in the *movement* of walking that I come to know my body and the history my body holds. When I walk, thoughts relax, and clusters of images find their way into words and sentences. Meaning, arriving in my lived experience, is not readily accessible, but the hints are there, and *I am here*, ready for the engagement. Writing, at least for now, is as stumbling as thoughts that ache to birth meaning. Yet the topics under consideration—my life, early childhood education, encounters with children, my cancer diagnosis—call me to take risks and to search for the words that attend and care for phenomena that I have left unsaid. Coming to learn how to slow down as I approach an idea doesn't necessarily make what I encounter and offer less challenging, but it does allow some distinctions to come to the surface.

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I fear the closeness. Courage is needed to explore openings for humility, vulnerability, questions, and anxieties. Poetry helps balance me. Within these pages I have attempted to create a hermeneutic text that invites listening. Certain words and phrases within an author's text carry an energy that calls me to attention. I try to reflect my embodied understanding of each chosen quote and create a found poem from within its landscape of words, images, and breath. I bring an author's text onto my page, generous with space and line breaks, not to reduce nor dishonor each quote but as an offering so that you and I might linger with the *in-between* (Hermes) spaces. And *then*, I feel compelled to respectfully respond in kind—in a poetic way that I hope leaves room for ever-expanding possibilities to arrive. My poems are offered as moments for pause and reflection and an act of reciprocity. In call-and-response, we work together to move the song along and in so doing, something arrives that is inventive and collective. I invite you, my reader, to linger as you read, that you may bring your memories, experiences, and interpretations to the found poems and my poetry, which may perhaps awaken or reveal something to help us, you and I, make sense of our lives (together). Poetry and textual dialogue is a reminder that we are never alone in this hermeneutic task of finding out where we are and what we are to do next. Dialogue is one of the best forms of play I know, *shadows and all*.

*Wild spaces—
opening, withdrawing.
Even cancer
Spills out.*

As Celeste Snowber (2016, p. 3) writes in her poem “BodyPsalm for Playing”:

Now is the season
to call back your heart
to live with lightness
and cherish the chance
to take back what you deeply know
find the joy in movements
which sweep your being
into first utterance

I place one of Renata Aebi’s (2023)² line drawings in this space to invite you to attend to the place that you are now sitting and, for a moment, this moment, to rest, to linger, to reflect, to breathe. Perhaps encountering Renata’s drawing here will encourage and remind you, throughout the text, to pause, to linger, with your life experiences, learnings, curiosities, wonderings, pedagogical or otherwise, and be present in a reflective dialogue that this text invites. Imagine a space that is free from constraints and expectations, breathe in the fresh sea air, the cedar boughs, feel the wind on your face. Here is my hope for your reading: that you will be present in dialogue and in reflection, and feel the gift of a pill bug offered, by a quiet child, in your hand. The white spaces on these pages, whether they be within the lines of this drawing, the images that are offered in the text, in the call and response between the poems or between the lines of the text, are invitations to think about the ways you want to act well in the world—as a scholar, an educator, a human in this more-than-human-world. I hope this moment of reflection I offer will be a reminder to take time with the text. We are in no hurry.



Fig. 2: Renata Aebi’s line drawings

I invite you now to imagine yourself walking with me into wild spaces. Imagine a spring in our steps and a little skip and jump when an idea feels worth following. Imagine too the little bits we trip over. Let's take time to stand in those tangles in the landscape. They are exactly the right spot to be in together. As David Jardine once wrote to me, "We both have knots to untie; different open invitations to offer and in meeting in that spot, (we are) able to remember to let go of something, let it go the way it will, and try not to argue it back over here" (personal communication, March 18, 2022).

Walking (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

move at a regular pace,
lifting and setting down each foot in turn,
never having both feet off the ground at once.

to advance by steps
to come or go easily or readily,
for exercise or pleasure.

walking the plank
walking on eggshells
walking (someone) through steps in a procedure
walking through the early stages of rehearsal

walk the talk
a walk in the park

walking my body
of research—

wind rain and river
noticing
witnessing

breaths held
lungs tight against
destinations
away from here
anywhere away from here

yet

here

knife slices
a gaping hole

silent scream's tendrils
threads
traces of
longing
capture attention

spaces expand

self appears and disappears in cycles
conversations between stones

Into the wild (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

not ordinarily tamed
or domesticated
growing or produced without human aid
uncultivated
unruly
beyond convention
off an intended or expected course
a wild, free, or natural state or existence
like wild honey
indicative of strong passion, desire, or emotion
cosmic web

plants that grow wild
wild ideas

wild with grief and
anger

into the wild

walking backward and forward
and trying
to write what happens

when a cut—
a shaft of light,
becomes a
sacred doorway

into Earth-bound beauty of
connections and
tangles
and searing tears

or a whispered lyric
full of promise

blending
claiming and being claimed
back and forth

unforgetting the stories helps

haze lifts
and fear and
belonging
exchange glances

a new beginning
revives a forgotten call to sit up, see, listen
commit to the obligations and
rise to meet one another
in liveliness

As I undo silence.

I am open to renewal. Renewal depends on taking time to understand my own twitches and knee-jerk actions, sleep-deprived states, my wrong-headedness that arises from a sense that boundaries, binaries, and constraints really do exist.

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My finitude flashes before my eyes on that day of my diagnosis: a life visible, then invisible. At that moment, my life is struck clean. "Having steeled ourselves by confronting the prospect of death, the scales of everydayness drop from our eyes, the authentic being of Dasein is disclosed and Dasein resolves upon its own most proper way to be" (Caputo, 2018, p. 51). Almost immediately, I was consumed by an urgency to get off the path I had been traveling. I wanted to learn to live and love well with others and to learn about my becoming in the world, with the fullness of knowing my human limits nested within this time and place. Thankfully, cancer treatments and academic school assignments slowed the rush. The period of diagnosis was a call for compassion for a heart that had been silenced long ago and had forgotten itself. Starting a journey when the end seems near made me connect *the river in the raindrop*, as the saying goes. In this way, I come close to understanding Buber's (1937) sense of *encounter* whereby the entire universe exists through this drop of rain.

Through *this* drop of rain.



Fig. 3: Drop of rain

I am learning to teach rhythmically and openly as I come to know the world and those I teach. Living is a dance of relationships that hold and sustain me—but it is not always the kind of dance I wish for or appreciate. Cancer evokes in me a desire to know these relationships in greater detail.

Let me bring you to the forest with Zoe.³

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The children love to play in the forest 100 meters from the childcare program, along a fence that reverberates with years of sticks playing its metal, diamond-patterned weave. The fallen cedar is a pirate ship one afternoon and a hospital the next. The leaves and sticks are the stuff of ice cream shops and swords. The children play back and forth across the trail where horses and dogs are announced with a clear “dog on the trail” voice from early childhood educators and children alike. Some children leap quickly to the side while others marvel at the animals as they brush along the low huckleberry bushes and mounds of sword ferns. The summer has been mild; it hasn’t rained for a few days and the old fallen trees capture our attention. Their drying bark, lying low to the ground and shaded by the big leaf maples, invites the children to prod and watch what shows up.

Zoe had been playing a game of “baby” before walking over to a decomposing cedar tree where two other children were trying to draw the attention of pill bugs. Zoe caught my eye as we stood watching the interplay of gaze and pill bugs. When the other children left, Zoe started to poke a small stick into the surface of the wood. I asked, “What do you think the pill bugs might be telling each other?” Zoe was silent. I waited wondering if she was thinking out a response or if she had not heard. Then she started gently poking at wood around the larvae. We watched them move between the tiny levels of wood, wiggling their way to darker spaces, their tiny heads raised and turning as though to tell us off. Then I asked another question: “Do you think the larvae are tasting the wind?” Still Zoe provided no comment. Close by was a pill bug, scurrying to safety. Before curling into its tiny-ball-self, she picked it up between thumb and forefinger. Zoe looked and looked and then placed it in my hand, catching my eye again.

Then without a word, she ran off to other games. A tumble and jumble of thoughts swirled as I held the little creature in my palm.

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I tell this story of Zoe, me, and the pill bug to emphasize the idea of relationship and how learning to understand pedagogical relationships is important in my teaching life. I want this story and smaller ones that I tell to form a kind of weave of trails on the landscape of my life as a teacher, friend, and student. I want the uncertainty, the silence, the questions, and the quiet inquiry to be carried along with me as I explore the ideas.

I am learning from my time with Zoe. Her short but important eye contact was a gift to me that I only recognized properly long after I had left the forest. Buber's (1937) *I-Thou* relationship is one where the potential for mutual understanding is noticed and nurtured: where the we-ness of the relationship is held. This moment is an empathic place for us. My inability to honor this gaze was lost because of my prejudices related to my narrow understanding of the role of teacher.

My questions seem to have been motivated by a desire to help Zoe think about the nature of homes and our responsibility to ensure the insect's security. Zoe's silence might attest to the need for me to refrain from teaching children about morality in such a sideways manner and to attend deeply to the way silence is a yielding—an intentional creation of space for pill bugs and their larvae and for watching and for opening me to beings—and a generative act conducive to deeper listening as I step out of myself and into this place of silence and forest: the wild not-yet-or-may-never-be-known.

Another way I might interpret my encounter with Zoe is to see her as embodying the quiet absorption that comes with study. In Zoe's case, her focus might have been the study of larvae and pill bugs, or it might have been of tree trunks and teachers. She embodies the art of questioning in her disposition to quietness and silence in the earth's company. When Zoe follows her wonder in relation to the pill bug, she lets the world express itself to her. Instead of being seen as noncommunicative with me, it may be that she already sees herself and her inquiry as recognized and supported through the past experiences I have had with her.

Human communication is meaning-making and connection. I am learning to understand that the role I play in my interactions with a child is to carefully choose when and how to go beyond the world of boundaries and correct answers. I am learning to wait carefully on the edge of the child's world so that the children and I might walk together. The dance to coordinate our actions begins, fails, succeeds, and stutter-steps along. Accepting my evolving interpretations of Zoe's *being with me* is an integral part of understanding itself. "Understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter's present situation" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 308). And yet, something more than that is happening.

By our very attitude to one another we help to shape one another's world.

Zoe hints at steps a teacher could take amid moments of ambiguity and indecision. When I revisit Zoe's attention to the pill bug, I learn to bring my heart to the moment. The subject of our attention—the pill bug, and perhaps its relationship to the log, the larvae, and beyond—"is not merely an arbitrary object of discussion, independent of the process of mutual understanding, but rather is the path and goal of mutual understanding itself" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 180). An experience like my encounter with Zoe invites me to attend to how I am called out of myself and into the world of other beings. My experience with her provides an opportunity to find times when instead of issuing questions, I might thoughtfully express openness and receptivity to what might be arising. Zoe had knowledge: she may have understood the pill bug had something to say. The forest, its cedar logs, the squeals of children chasing each other, all helped me become aware of the importance of the space between teacher and child. The ways I honor this space are becoming increasingly important for me to learn. I interpret this event as a moment where Zoe stepped back and away as a yielding: an invitation to encounter the pill bug and all its connections—quietly.

As I deepen my interpretation of my time with Zoe, I am learning to be grateful for understanding what it means to encounter myself and others in teaching; from such encounters, renewal is possible. Zoe and her capacity to stay quiet despite my questioning is a gift: an opportunity to develop a commitment to make ongoing adjustments, of stepping back, yielding, listening, watching, and feeling my way in life. Walking backward and appreciating the offered free spaces marks the condition and the result of my practice. Doing so may allow me to preserve the pill bug within its forested world and its relationship to Zoe so that these relationships among humans and animals and the forest can be returned to again and again.

*Words can be such piercing things.
Silence is something I must listen to and
when I do, it catches hold of me. It tells me how to know things,
like if the river is about to swell or
if
the Steller's Jay is on the hunt.*

*In silence
I become aware of something larger
opened by the light
dancing
between the trees.*

The child and I gather an energy that helps us notice ambiguity and yield to it when necessary, allowing it the space it needs to loosen its own knots. Studying myself within relationships with children, decaying cedar trees, pill bug larvae—all nested within the dappled light of the forest—helps me understand myself as one of many co-arising actors on this Earth. I am trying to act in ways that may help get myself out of the present downward-spiraling conditions that a cancer diagnosis can engender.

Zoe demonstrated to me that I had not yet learned to release my agenda. I am learning now to abandon my overreliance on an ordered system that mirrors curriculum guides; instead, I am learning to be in a child's midst so that I might understand what I am being asked to consider, interpret, and interpret again and again. I am learning to be near in terms of the dialogue I have with each child while backing up and giving space for our dialogue to find its footing. I do not have an expectation for one solid, end-all answer, although this feeling creeps into my stories sometimes. I understand many interpretations will arise and that I will be carried into the next interpretation, and then the next. Nourishing a greater understanding of myself and the ways I am being called to act in the world requires attending to ideas and interpretations and then letting go—about unlearning some things and unforgetting others.

A friend, fluent in Japanese, showed me the Japanese characters for forgetting. Using a small yellow notepad, she wrote the characters:



Fig. 4: Japanese characters for forgetting

One part of the character means *passing away* and the other part means *heart*. Forgetting is a little like allowing the heart to pass away. Through cancer I have become acutely aware of forgotten kinships, interrelations, and interdependencies of this life. Sometimes this coming to awareness is painful learning and with practice I am, on occasion, learning to suffer life's generosities with gratitude. Recovery needs patience and determination. These kinships show themselves among and between my teaching experiences with preschool children, my walks on mountains and by the shore. Reflection in, and after, these experiences leads me increasingly to complex understandings of myself and of my connections to Earth. I am reminded of Lee Maracle's (2002) novel, *Daughters Are Forever*, in which protagonist Marilyn walks and stills herself to listen to Westwind's messages as she explores the impacts of colonialism and patriarchy. Lee Maracle—like many Indigenous authors of fiction such as Linda Hogan (1998), Craig Womback (2001), Louise Erdrich (2008)—call me to

*walk in a graceful manner
and learn to
carry the composing cosmos
in my steps.*

Relationships to others—those here now, particularly small children, and those who have come before, be they family or scholars—awaken me to the steps I take. I feel my relationship to my body and its intimate connection to Earth when I attend to my walking. “The body I am is my most intimate point of entry into the world” (Kohak, 1984, p. 105). In me, I am becoming aware of the complexities of relationships: between older and younger; teacher and learner; and the private realm of home and the public, organized body. I am answerable to these relationships.

Listening is no simple or easy task, and it is especially challenging when some voices are silenced. Christina Lee Countryman (2016) comments that

[e]ach stone in the stream helps the water have a different voice,
a unique song.
We humans are like that too.
Each responding to the current of life in our own way.
The river spirit tells me though, we are all the same stream.
Each individual bears a personal responsibility
for the behavior of the species

Calls for understanding the interrelationships and co-emergence of beings in the world require me to de-center myself. In my role as teacher, I have found that my understanding of the knotty and often dazzling interconnections of this Earth entice me to keep the world open by keeping myself open. Each informs the other and nurtures a deeper understanding of ways to act in the world.

Writing has helped me open and nurture a sensitivity to “a hermeneutical ear, [and] hermeneutical tact” (Caputo, 2018 p. 35). I am becoming aware of myself as a finite flicker of energy on this Earth alongside and woven with rich, complex, surging beings. I am learning how to love the intricacies, the cracks, crevices, and challenges along the way. “It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end” (Le Guin, 1969, p. 109).

This break from my desire for stasis arose out of the cancer that showed itself to me. Arendt (1958) asserts that while we “must die [we] are not born to die but in order to begin” (p. 246). Again and again, I need breath for these waking moments where

opportunities
are not plain, clean gifts;
they trail dark and chaotic attachments to their unknown backgrounds,
luring us
further.
One insight leads to another;
one invention suggests another variation;
more and more
seems to press through the hole,
and more and more

we find ourselves drawn out into a chaos
of possibilities (Hillman, 2013, p. 94)

I listen to learn what path to “lay down in walking”⁴ (Machado, 1987, as quoted in Fels, 1999). Louise Erdrich (2008), a Chippewa author and member of the Turtle Island Band, notes that “when we are young, the words are scattered all around us. As they are assembled by experience, so are we, sentence by sentence” (p. 268). The language of description is an inheritance that brings its own worlds. I am trying to say that my shared stories mean something to me now even though some of a story might *come to mean* something else later, as presuppositions are tested and released, and new stories enliven understanding. The storied past—my own and others’—puts me into question. Doing justice in this moment has something to do with trying to notice when I want to outrun the past and all its interpretations. I am called to stay with the past, called to suffer it, to be freed from it. I step back into the memories in ways that allow the previous understandings to shift in response to new information, the telling of what I think I know, yet unfinished.

I tell my stories to share my struggles and joys and to connect with those who live in this wildness of not knowing, undoing, and unlearning. When I respect, regard, and nurture all relationships

human and more-than-human

through the committed exchange of attention, I celebrate our differences and take strength from what is un/common.

Doing justice to any moment can be, and often is, difficult and different at different times. I accept its work in composing me. I am steeped, like a good cup of tea, in the words and models of those I admire. The ideas have taken shape and found themselves some footing through the writing and the walking. Increasingly, I have become sensitive to nuances in familiar and new contexts.

What came before enriches today’s commitment. All that I have experienced and interpreted is carried along with me. But I am coming to understand that I don’t really possess those experiences. There’s freedom in knowing what is important to call upon at *this* moment.

Learning to listen and to make the right-as-possible choice from what is already there and being offered is a practice that helps me sort my way out of the *stuckness* that often happens, or the weightiness I sometimes feel. The fleeting sense of lightness—it doesn’t often last long as there is work to be done—that comes from an interpretation that was dug into, that was given its due, is one mark of being fully engaged in this practice of dwelling with a boundless heart.

Through my slowly increasing understanding of hermeneutics and how it can be practiced, new questions have begun to form. The practice of hermeneutics as inquiry helps me to develop an ability to see and be grateful for experiences of the past. We always have an experience *of* something (Gadamer, 1989; Jardine, 1998) and learning to listen to my heartbeat and its rhythms is a step in learning how to

name those experiences. What openings are being created through this practice? What steps am I being asked to take? How will I take those steps?

Opening to, rather than bracing myself against, the full impact of reading, thinking, loving, walking, and responding in this more-than-human world (Abram, 1997) means recognizing that the air rustling in those trees that sway outside my window and the curl of a pill bug have always been here—with me.

The openness and willingness to be tested in this way—to let go of a limited sense of self, gather again, re-enliven—does justice to the moment. Each instance shows its powerful abundance. By courageously venturing into, dwelling on, and interpreting these moments with an open heart, I experience the generative effect of this work whereby the interweavings show up in the foreground of my everyday world.

I am learning to express joy and surprise when the *new* bursts forth, especially when it bursts from the familiar. Meaning making is lively, living. Through openness, I am coming to ask questions of myself such as “why I teach” rather than “what I teach.” When I aim to unhinge my own conceptual approaches from their moorings enough to venture into uncharted spaces, I begin to realize the importance of making my beliefs and values about teaching and learning matter to myself, with the children who live here with us: born strangers and welcomed into a web of human relations within a world to which we all belong and owe a responsibility to (Arendt, 1958, p. 54). In this way I am learning to respond to the questions: *How can I learn to walk without tripping over myself? How can I learn to walk with grace?*

~

I return to the introduction when I invited you to wear light shoes and carry a readiness to be open to what arises. As we sit on a log and retie our shoes, we can hear each other’s breathing. Sitting to tie our shoes, we notice how important it is to stop and listen. Our breaths dance together slowly and rhythmically. We become aware of our bodies in relation to this landscape. Usually, I think slowing and breathing deeply should happen when I am suffering, or in conflict with myself or another. I am learning that slowing to stillness, and listening, is needed beyond times of tension. When I listen, I stop trying to push answers out of children, out of myself, out onto the Earth. Questions, connections, and hermeneutic inquiries are released and enlivened when the children and I walk slowly together and listen. If we, as educators, are willing to listen, to be still and present to our students, to ourselves, with an open heart, we may become aware of our assumptions, resistances, expectations and where and when they conflict with what the Earth is saying.⁵ In my retelling of the places where I tripped and the places I blithely traversed uneven terrain, in this shared experience of slowing to stillness and listening, I am learning to walk with grace and the potential for renewal is possible.

Notes

1. Here Buber uses the example “tree.”
2. Gift of unpublished drawing, Renata Aebi, Doctoral Candidate (SFU).
3. Not her real name. The selection of the name came because I have always liked it for its playfulness on my tongue. I look at the roots or meanings of words. The Greek name Zoe means life, and for my purposes, it offers a generous place to learn. Rosi Braidotti (2019) notes Zoe is “the power of life ‘as potentia’” (p. 177). Braidotti’s exploration of this word left me with a strong image of Zoe as generative and resistant and has given me a complex understanding of what life means. This is certainly a disposition to hold when working through the curriculum guides that stand steadfastly in binaries and dictates. I have learned from this exploration of Zoe to be wide-eyed and all ears to the things that show themselves.
4. In her work, Fels (1999) quotes Antonio Machado’s poem, as translated by Francisco Varela.
5. I would like to thank Dr. Lynn Fels for continuing to walk beside me in this study. Her review of my words strengthens my writing and my teaching.

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