

# The Curriculum of Becoming Human: A Ruminantion

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*The poet engages in the kind of guerrilla warfare that is always necessary on behalf of oppressed people. (Brueggemann, 2001, p. 73)*

*Relationship is not tangential to consciousness. Consciousness as we know it, including a capacity for learning, focus, self-reflection, the ability to speak, think, to contemplate, cannot develop without the presence of others. (Griffin, 1995, p. 69)*

*Eventually I discovered that writing a meditation involves – certainly the mind, but also the heart, the body, the spirit. It's a quest, a quest of attending, and it unfolds on all those wave-lengths. And that's what I had to learn to do on the page. (Lee, 1995, p. 30)*

I recently completed a collection of poems titled *I do not find it easy to be a human being*. The poems are autobiographical, confessional, philosophical, prophetic, and pedagogical. The poems are full of questions and glimpses of truth and whispers of conviction. The collection was completed through the life passage of my forties – a decade fraught with crises and cries, despair and hope. I celebrated my fiftieth birthday recently, and this significant experience of passage, especially while on sabbatical leave and living in the solitude of York Harbour, Newfoundland, is providing a location for assessing what I think is really important in education. And in the process of this current assessment I find that I am returning to places I was in my teens, twenties, thirties, and forties.

In recent months I have had the privilege of spending time with elderly people, folk in their seventies and eighties. And a recurring lesson that I learn from elderly people is that simply growing old does not mean a person has gained wisdom or learned how to live well. In fact, I am meeting a few elderly people who seem to have gained little wisdom in the passage of the decades. I have recently met some selfish, self-centred, spitey, spoiled old people who only want to talk a lot, seldom ever listen, talk constantly in clichés, and complain incessantly about the weather and politicians and growing old. What I am keenly learning from elderly people who exemplify wisdom is that the education of the heart, imagination, body, and mind are contingent on a sturdy commitment to practice, especially the practice of living well.

Of the many books I have read in the past several years, none has held my attention more than Vanier's *Becoming Human* (1998). Vanier asks: "Is this not the life undertaking of us all . . . to become human? It can be a long and sometimes painful process. It involves a growth to freedom, an opening up of our hearts to others, no longer hiding behind masks or behind the walls of fear and prejudice. It means discovering our common humanity" (p.1). Vanier asks, "Are not all our lives a movement from order to disorder, which in turn evolves into a new order?" (p.12) In response to his own question, he proposes that "to be human is to create sufficient order so that we can move on into insecurity and seeming

disorder. In this way, we discover the new” (p.13). With a poet’s simple insight, Vanier notes: “It takes time to grow to a maturity of the heart” (p.58). I resonate with Vanier’s views and convictions, and I propose that educators can be guided by Vanier’s wisdom for becoming human.

Vanier spells out several interconnected principles for promoting and practicing a curriculum of becoming human. On the one hand, there is a lucid simplicity in his convictions, but in the paradoxical way of transformative wisdom, Vanier’s apparent simplicity is rooted in a profound engagement with human living, especially energized by an indefatigable hopefulness. Vanier’s first principle is that “all humans are sacred, whatever their culture, race, or religion, whatever their capacities or incapacities, and whatever their weaknesses or strengths may be” (p.14). For Vanier, “the belief in the inner beauty of each and every human being is...at the heart of all true education and at the heart of being human” (p.23). So often, school culture is based on competition, not collaboration, on a measure of excellence that renders many students mediocre, on a focus on academic or athletic accomplishments instead of emotional, spiritual, political, psychological, and philosophical growth.

According to Vanier, another principle for informing a curriculum of becoming human is that “our world and our individual lives are in the process of evolving” (p.14), and because we are always in process, “maturity comes through working with others, through dialogue, and through a sense of belonging and a searching together” (p.14). I especially appreciate Vanier’s emphasis on collaboration in learning, growing, and maturing. The word *pedagogy* is etymologically related to the Greek word *pedagogue* (*paidagogos*: *paidos* = child + *agein* = to lead), which refers to the ancient Greek practice when a family slave called a pedagogue walked the child to the place of learning. The pedagogue was not the teacher, but the person who walked with the student to the place where the teacher taught.

Vanier reminds me of another Greek word, *paraclete*, which means “the one who comes alongside.” This word is like Vanier’s word “accompanier” which “comes from the Latin words *cum pane*, which mean ‘with bread.’ It implies sharing together, eating together, nourishing each other, walking together” (p.129). Like the words pedagogue and paraclete, “an accompanier is someone who can stand beside us on the road to freedom, someone who loves us and understands our life” (p.128).

Finally, Vanier proposes that “human beings need to be encouraged to make choices, and to become responsible for their own lives and for the lives of others” (p.15), and “in order to make such choices, we need to reflect and to seek truth and meaning” (p.15). Obviously, Vanier’s principles for becoming human are wide-reaching and complex. Vanier is no television huckster selling guaranteed remedies for weight loss or sharply defined abdominal muscles or anti-bacterial soap. Vanier is not spelling out ten sure-fire solutions for a happy and prosperous life. Vanier is a philosopher, theologian, teacher, and activist. He does not underestimate the challenges of becoming human, but he optimistically, even urgently, promotes the necessary value of attending to our humanity and our growth in humanness.

Vanier’s convictions about becoming human are echoed in the texts of many scholars and educators. Perhaps what distinguishes Vanier is his emphasis on the heart as integral to all learning and growing. He writes: “We have disregarded the heart, seeing it only as a

symbol of weakness, the centre of sentimentality and emotion, instead of as a powerhouse of love that can reorient us from our self-centredness, revealing to us and to others the basic beauty of humanity, empowering us to grow” (p.78). Vanier’s challenge and invitation to educators is to reclaim the heart as “a powerhouse of love” that can generate communication and communion and community.

What we need in schools is a commitment to investigating seriously and sincerely what it means to be human, to become human, to acknowledge the humanity of other humans, to know our ecological interconnections in the wide expanse of the earth, even the universe. As educators we need to promote and practice a curriculum of becoming human. While I was recently re-reading Vanier’s *Becoming Human*, I also read several other books by authors who are distinctly different from Vanier, but I was struck by resonances in these diverse texts, and realized again how important it is for educators to invite into conversation a wide range of diverse voices that might be, at times, contested, cantankerous, and cacophonous, but might also hold the possibility of generating a lively and productive discussion.

One of the books I read while re-reading Vanier was Eagleton’s *The Illusions of Post-modernism* (1996). Eagleton is a brilliant literary scholar, and I have read his books for many years. I seldom agree with Eagleton; most of the time I disagree vociferously. But in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* I found a view (amidst many other perspectives I keenly dispute) that spoke clearly to my sense of conviction about the significance of a curriculum of becoming human. Eagleton defines virtue as “the shape, texture and quality of a whole life in its practical social context” (p.109). I am encouraged by Eagleton’s view that “virtue is a matter of the proper, pleasurable fulfilment of one’s human powers, both a practice and a matter of practise. Being human is a set of techniques, something you have to get good at like tolerating bores or playing the harmonica, and you cannot do it on your own any more than you could carry out major surgery simply by instinct” (p.109). The curriculum of becoming human involves learning through practice, reflection, conversation, collaboration, courage, and commitment how to be human.

Also, while re-reading Vanier, I read Ungerleider’s provocative new book, *Failing Our Kids: How We Are Ruining our Public Schools* (2003). Ungerleider presents a compelling critique of public schooling in Canada. With his extensive professional and academic background (including Professor of Education, Associate Dean of Teacher Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, and Deputy Minister of Education in the British Columbia government), Ungerleider speaks from a position of knowledge, experience, and authority.

I admire Ungerleider’s courage in this book. His arguments are carefully presented and meticulously supported. But what I admire most about *Failing Our Kids: How We Are Ruining our Public Schools* is the way that Ungerleider is not afraid to declare a strong sense of moral purpose for Canada’s public schools. Ungerleider writes: “The one institution capable of preserving Canada’s fragile sense of self is the public school. It is a potentially powerful force for integrating Canadians and countering some of the forces fragmenting our society by communicating core Canadian values, teaching about our history and institutions, providing experience with democratic processes, and inculcating respect for people” (p.17).

I can imagine some readers will read this sentence and shrug their shoulders, *Yeah, right! More mumbo-jumbo about how important schools are. Sounds like a speech a politician might make during Education Week.* Certainly, Ungerleider does not shy away from abstract phrases like “Canada’s fragile sense of self” or “integrating Canadians” or “fragmenting our society” or “communicating core Canadian values” or “democratic processes” or “respect for people.” All of these abstract phrases are constantly questioned in education research and scholarship and practice. I constantly question these kinds of abstract phrases in my writing. I grew up in Newfoundland, and I have lived for more than a decade in British Columbia (where I have been a colleague of Ungerleider’s), and I have lived, worked, and studied in New Brunswick, Ontario and Alberta, as well. I know the country of Canada in wide-ranging and intimate ways, and I certainly agree with Ungerleider’s observation about “Canada’s fragile sense of self.” Canada is a nation that needs a lot of imagination in order to nurture its story of identity. Goals of “integrating Canadians” or “communicating core Canadian values” or “inculcating respect for people” are goals with more challenges than shooting pucks at a hockey net protected by Patrick Roy. But that is exactly why I appreciate Ungerleider’s book full of hopeful and urgent convictions.

Ungerleider doesn’t mince words with his judgement that “the curriculum of the public school has become bloated, fragmented, mired in trivia, and short on ideas. It does not demand that students connect what they learn with anything else. It does not challenge them to reach beyond their limits. The curriculum stifles curiosity. Although it demands effort, it does not reward deep thought” (p.105). And according to Ungerleider, “we are drowning in a sea of information. Each day another tsunami heads our way. Most people mistakenly confuse information with knowledge and trivia with education. It is one of the reasons the curricula of our schools are overcrowded” (p.106).

Here are timely and provocative views that call out for attention. Ungerleider provides many practical suggestions for revising curricular goals and resources and practices. Ultimately his book is motivated by an agenda that is political, pedagogical, and practical. His suggestions are not armchair philosophizing. Just like Vanier has devoted his life to working with adults with cognitive challenges, Ungerleider has devoted his life to improving public school education.

I am not suggesting that Ungerleider and Vanier share a common vision for pedagogy. They approach issues of education in distinctly different ways. Ungerleider promotes an approach to curriculum development based on an examination of core values, a commitment to supporting critical thinking, and a focus on instruction in social democracy. His language, perspectives, and foundations are clearly different from Vanier (or Eagleton), but I still appreciate the resonances that sing out in these diverse texts. So I pay careful attention to Ungerleider’s advice: “We should create an ethic of responsibility for the welfare of all students that includes two related sentiments: (1) that the success of the individual is the success of the entire class or school; and (2) that if one student fails, we have all failed” (p.283). He adds: “The approach I am recommending makes student success a responsibility of the entire community” (p.284).

Even though Vanier and Ungerleider approach issues of education from significantly different perspectives, Ungerleider’s conviction regarding the responsibility of the entire community for nurturing student success echoes Vanier’s views. Above all, what

Ungerleider and Vanier promote is the need for educators to work creatively with colleagues, students, parents, and others in their specific local contexts and communities.

This experience of educational leadership that is focused on the local community is well-represented in Dean's *Hearts and Minds: A Public School Miracle* (2000) in which Dean narrates the remarkable experience of South Simcoe Public School in Oshawa's inner city. Once regarded only as a school riddled with problems, Dean, as the new principal, led what she calls "a revolution of the heart" (p. 190). Dean explains that "the key to all that we accomplished at South Simcoe was our focus on respect" (p. 40). She explains this focus:

Our Respect program was graphically depicted as a series of concentric circles...with Respect for Oneself at the centre. Radiating from this were other circles, representing Respect for Others in the Classroom; Respect for Others in the School; Respect for the Family; Respect for the Local Community; Respect for the Environment; and Respect for Others in the Global Community – different cultures, races and backgrounds (pp.155-6).

In the practice of becoming a school administrator, Dean realized that "education...could not end at the playground gate. Nor could the demands of life stop there. They both worked best when integrated – when social issues reached into the school, and when education extended into the needs of home and family" (p.192). For all the successes that Dean and her colleagues enjoyed in creating an effective school in Oshawa, Dean does not diminish the challenges of transformative schooling practice. Dean acknowledges, "we had to accept the frustrating fact that we could never solve all the problems that arose within the walls of the school, no matter how hard we tried" (p.136) But this clear estimate of real challenges is weighed in the balance with a conviction for living well in the world: "I have always believed that, if you are on the right path, the right things will happen" (p.216).

In a similar way, Tompkins narrates her story of educational leadership in a school in Nunavut. In *Teaching In a Cold and Windy Place: Change In an Inuit School* (1998), Tompkins recounts how, as an educational leader, she was able to initiate changes by combining contemporary scholarship and research with a vision focused on the local community. She worked hard as a principal to create conditions for change, and with four years of careful and collaborative interventions and efforts, the school emerged as "hopeful and productive and well on the way to meeting the needs of all the students in the community" (p.4).

Tompkins promotes "the important role that our own personal story plays in how we act out our professional role. I have learned how my own story greatly shaped the beliefs I carried to the job in Anurapaktuq" (p.129). Therefore, Tompkins advocates narrative inquiry that attends to the lived and local experiences of teachers and administrators because life stories provide "a means of reflecting with a view towards action" (p.129). When teachers and administrators are also researchers, they bring "to the job a dimension of reflection and critical learning" that fosters "energy, drive, and enthusiasm" (p.129).

This is the kind of narrative, biographical, and autobiographical research that is crucial for addressing questions about the curriculum of becoming human. On the one hand, the stories we tell about ourselves are always unique and coloured in the keenly experienced sense of individual selfhood and subjectivity, but, on the other hand, our seemingly unique

stories are inextricably connected to many other people and the communities that help inform and shape our sense of identity and purpose. Griffin understands that “the self does not exist in isolation” (p.50) because “to know the self is to enter a social process” (p.51). I agree with Griffin that identity is “less an assertion of independence than an experience of interdependence,” (p.91) and, therefore, “for each of us, as for every community, village, tribe, nation, the story we tell ourselves is crucial to who we are, who we are becoming” (p.152).

Some scholars and teachers object to the inclusion of personal stories, information, opinions, and ideas in writing intended for a public audience. Griffin points out that “at a fairly recent point in the history of the essay it became a radical act to use the pronoun ‘I’” (p.164). I champion the value, even necessity, of writing our lived and living stories. I do not use the pronoun “I” in my writing out of a shameless sense of self-importance or aggrandizement. I avoided the pronoun “I” in my writing for many years because I had been well-schooled by teachers that all personal references, including the pronoun “I,” should be avoided in standard academic discourse.

Now, as a poet whose teaching and research and scholarship are all steeped in the rhythms, conventions, and dynamics of poetry, I celebrate the pronoun “I,” by writing more and more from the experience of the personal, from the location of the pronoun “I.” And so, I continue this rumination on the curriculum of becoming human with a further turn that is overtly personal but conscientiously connected to the ongoing conversation.

As an educator and a poet, I am always seeking the right path, the path of wisdom and light. In that pursuit, I often turn to texts by spiritual leaders and scholars, such as Vanier, especially Jewish, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist writers. Like Freire (1997), “I do not feel very comfortable speaking about my faith. At least, I do not feel as comfortable as I do when speaking about my political choice, my utopia, and my pedagogical dreams” (p.104). I live in the world as a Christian believer. I was graduated from a theological seminary in 1979 with a graduate certificate in Christian studies. My poetry and pedagogy and philosophy are all informed by my Christian convictions. Like Freire, “I do want to mention... the fundamental importance of my faith in my struggle for overcoming an oppressive reality and for building a less ugly society, one that is less evil and more humane” (p.104). But, more and more, I am embracing the need to write about my whole experience of becoming human, acknowledging the ecological interconnections of the intellectual, creative, embodied, emotional, and spiritual identities that shape who I am and who I am becoming in the world.

Underhill (1999) was a noted writer on mysticism and the first woman to lecture on theology at Oxford. In the early 1920s Underhill presented three addresses that were subsequently published in *Concerning the Inner Life*. Underhill contends that “to be spiritually alive means to be growing and changing; not to settle down among a series of systematized beliefs and duties, but to endure and go on enduring the strains, conflicts and difficulties incident to development” (p.29). I am convinced that as educators we need to attend to, and listen to, our spirits, our hearts, our inner life, our imaginations, our emotions, our bodies, our minds. Educators live such demanding and challenging lives that it is very difficult to maintain the time and location for nurturing the inner life. Teaching involves a constant drain on all our resources. Teachers literally burn out. We need a healthy inner life if we are going to help others develop healthy inner lives.

What do teachers need in order to maintain a healthy inner life? Educators need a keen sense of vocation, an abiding sense of wonder, an indefatigable sense of hope, a careful attentiveness to generative myths, a lively appreciation of the ineffable, an ongoing experience of silence, stillness, and simplicity, a steady sense of equilibrium, a pulsing heart of love, adoration, and passion, a gurgling well of delight, a relentless commitment to devotion, and an unstoppable spring of humour, humility, and humanity. Educators are always in process, not afraid of change, conflict, and growth. Underhill asks: "Is your sense of wonder and mystery keen and deep?" (p.20) I especially admire Underhill's conviction that creating the inner life "means giving time, patience, effort to such a special discipline and cultivation of your attention as artists must give, if they are to enter deeply into the reality and joy of natural loveliness and impart it in their work" (p.20).

And to foster this abiding commitment to an active inner life, I recommend the need for poets, poetry, and living poetically. In an extraordinary book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Brueggemann (2001) writes that "imagination is indeed a legitimate way of knowing" (p. x). A scholar of Christian theology, Brueggemann presents a carefully articulated explanation of biblical prophets and their commitments and wisdom. He suggests that "the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us" (p.3). Brueggemann understands that "prophetic imagination as it may be derived from Moses is concerned with matters political and social, but it is as intensely concerned with matters linguistic (how we say things) and epistemological (how we know what we know)" (p.21).

Brueggemann's goal to exemplify "the prophetic imagination" reminds me to consider the nature of "the pedagogic imagination." (I thank my colleague Dr. Fleurette Sweeney, an outstanding educator and mentor, for introducing me to Brueggemann and for energizing my vision with the related expression "the pedagogic imagination.") In explicating a poem by a biblical prophet, Brueggemann writes:

It is only a poem, and we might say rightly that singing a song does not change reality. However, we must not say that with too much conviction. The evocation of an alternative reality consists at least in part in the battle for language and the legitimization of a new rhetoric. The language of the empire is surely the language of managed reality, of production and schedule and market. But that language will never permit or cause freedom because there is no newness in it. (p.18)

Brueggemann is concerned "to recognize how singularly words, speech, language, and phrase shape consciousness and define reality" (p.64). As a poet and educator, I am delighted to read Brueggemann's claim that "poetic imagination is the last way left in which to challenge and conflict the dominant reality" (p.40). And I hear in Brueggemann's words, echoes of Freire (1997) whose influence in my thinking continues to grow as I continue to imbibe his words and spirit. In *Pedagogy of the Heart*, published after his death, Freire writes: "I like being a person precisely because of my ethical and political responsibility before the world and other people. I cannot be if others are not; above all, I cannot be if I forbid others from being" (p.59). For Freire, "a new reading of my world requires a new language – that of possibility, open to hope" (p.77) And Freire understands "the truth is that the future is created by us, through transformation of the *present*" (p.79).

I never underestimate the challenges of becoming human. Years ago I was rushing from school on my way home. I had promised my wife that I would not be late. I had been late many times lately. I always had a reasonable explanation for my tardiness. Most school days brought a litany of emergencies and demands and crises. But Lana had made it clear that she was finding the long winter tiresome and the demands of two young children taxing. She told me simply that she needed me to arrive home on time so she could go for a long walk and attend to some chores. When classes ended, I met with a few students, made further plans for lessons, checked all the classroom windows, tidied my desk, and left the school just in time to arrive home at the promised time. As I drove home I passed the mother of a student. She was carrying several sagging bags of groceries. Walking was unusually difficult in the new snow that had accumulated recently on the sides of the road. I knew where she lived, and how far she still had to walk. I wanted to stop and pick her up. But I had promised my wife I would be home on time. And so, once more, I faced an ethical dilemma. I could not both help my student's mother and arrive home on time. That day, I chose to go home.

I recall this incident, many years later, because that abiding sense of the challenges involved in ethical living, in becoming human, has been with me all my life, and I am sure it will continue to be with me all my life. In his Nobel Lecture, the poet Heaney (1995) refers to "the complexities" of the "adult predicament" where a person has "to adjudicate among promptings variously ethical, aesthetical, moral, political, metrical, sceptical, cultural, topical, typical, post-colonial and, taken all together, simply impossible" (pp.13-14). I am especially intrigued with the phrase "simply impossible." In all my writing and teaching and living, I am sustained by poetry and language, hope and heart, humour and humility, enthusiasm and passion, but I always feel that keen awareness (not resignation) that becoming human is "simply impossible." And that is how I feel about curriculum, too. It is "simply impossible." But, of course, that does not mean that we do not continue to imagine and create and promote new possibilities. Surely, all possibilities are born out of a dialectic with impossibility. What educators need is an energetic commitment to searching and researching, to reforming and transforming, to being and becoming human.

I conclude this rumination on the curriculum of becoming human with a poem that I wrote recently while on sabbatical leave in York Harbour, Newfoundland. I conclude with "Ecology" because this poem represents the kind of wisdom that I am seeking, the kind of wisdom that I think we need to foster as an integral dynamic of schooling. This poem is about caring, compassion, connections, illness, heart-break, death, hope, and humanity. This poem is about the possibility of living creatively when we acknowledge our ecological connections in the earth, the interconnections of hearts that extend beyond time and place, even beyond life and death. This poem is part of the curriculum of becoming human.

## **ECOLOGY**

in the solitude of sabbatical retreat  
in York Harbour on the Atlantic cusp,  
I am learning to hear the heart's light  
lyrically borne on titanium filaments,  
strong and resilient, beyond breaking

I live without a clock, in the heart's time,  
no longer a crone's gigolo beating  
to the incessant whine of chronos  
measured precisely like cement blocks

instead of rushing from task to task,  
without end or satisfaction, compelling  
my body to catch up when it can,  
I now move slowly, feel my feet,  
grounded, taste the heart's rhythm

in my old life, I had little time for grief  
or prayer, God lost in the frantic crowd,  
but now I hold others in the heart's space,  
in the quiet time of imagination's bounty

in the still silence of York Harbour  
like a monastery in moonlight on the edge  
of the snowlight sea, I hold friends located  
on lines of latitude throughout the earth,  
friends with hearts, both swollen and splintered

in the half dozen months I have dwelled  
here, one friend has died with cancer,  
another has received the dread news,  
two more are regaining health after cancer

I hold each one in the sunlight of winter time  
and others, too, who are finding middle age  
a dark forest where they are lost and will  
not be found like my pastor who no longer  
knows God, claims God no longer knows him

I hold each one in winter light like Clive  
who taught me Wittgenstein while I taught him  
the basics of teaching grade 9's the novel,  
whose heart stopped in Japan, my age, now gone

in today's e-mail I learned that Bill died  
in his sleep (could Bill have stayed up all night  
and beat death like a Stephen King novel?)  
and I recall how Bill sat on the rock outside PonF  
with a tender smile for everyone hurrying by

if I can believe in an invisible net of worldwide  
interconnections in cyberspace, surely I can  
believe in the ecology of words and lines of care  
borne lightly in the heart, even the unbearable

I will hold my friends through the blustery  
winds of winter into the promises of spring  
as I know they will hold me, in blood-beating  
heart and imagination and memory beyond  
all counting of tense time, in tenderness only

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