“In the Noontime Sun in Summer”: Abundance Reconsidered

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Preamble

In the process of writing this article, I decided, a bit ironically, I suppose, to take a break and get a bit of sun during the eclipse: August 21, 2017, around 11:30 AM, MDT, and me, 52 degrees north in the Rocky Mountain foothills, west and south of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

And then I just happened to notice these shadows on the deck cast through a leafy lilac bush.

My camera doesn’t quite do this justice, but the bush’s overlapping leaves made countless, overlapping pinhole-camera images betraying arcs of the moon’s shadow in what appears to be a three-dimensional image.

It is a lovely example of a sort of happenstance exuberance of things—and it fell right in line with what I was trying to write. It is exhilarating to think about how much is folded into the curves of this image, and how freely and freshly available it was.

Treating this image not as an isolated thing but as a gateway into worlds of relations takes patience and practice. “Without the readiness of the person who is receiving and assimilating the text to be ‘all ears,’ no . . . text [or thing or image] will speak.”1 Such readiness, too, is a practice that must be practiced if we are to become practiced in it.

Teachers already know something of this when listening carefully to students. It is how to read the sky with some acuity, how to decode the whiffs of smoke in the air this whole summer.

Becoming thus practiced takes the patience and fellowship of others reading my own experiences of things back to me in ways that go beyond my own ability and experience. Curriculum in abundance, like teaching itself, is a practice.

I think, too, about how very easy this would have been to miss.

Part One: “Regimes of Scarcity”

In educational circles, “regimes of scarcity”2 have promoted [the belief] that things are simple and monitor-able and manageable. Abundance and diversity become drained out of the topics [being taught] and become signs, rather, of the pathological variety of “learning styles” we each bring with us to

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2 Ivan Illich (with David Cayley), Ivan Illich in Conversation (Concord ON: The House of Anansi Press, 1992), 118.
the classroom. We are suggesting something different—that the topics entrusted to schools are abundant and, therefore, suggestions of multiplicity and diversity are not opulent educational options. Rather, the [diverse and multiple] ways of traversing a place that students bring to the classroom is precisely what [abundant, multiple and diverse] things require if they are to be “adequately” understood in their abundance.³

It has been over ten years since my colleagues and I glanced upon the idea of curriculum in abundance. This image of abundance struck a chord with practicing teachers, but the chord it struck was not one of Romantic hopes and sloppy dreams.

Rather, teachers, then and since, have spoken of the ubiquitous experience of scarcity, of time and materials and energy and knowledge itself always on the verge of running out, causing a mood of embattlement and the need to be, as a consequence, hunkered down, barricaded, doling out teaching and learning in a zero-sum game of competition, exchanges of piece-work for marks, and an ever-accelerating pursuit of an ever-receding promise, leading to exhaustion, frustration, and, in some schools, an unfulfilling culture of complaint.

Under regimes of threat—not enough time, high-stakes tests, competition for spots in further education, and so on—vibrant, rich and exploratory attention is hard to maintain. Without practice, it atrophies, and such atrophy makes exploratory attention increasingly unpracticed, thus increasing a sense of scarcity and threat, thus tying tighter the knot.

The tragedy comes when, once atrophied, one is resignedly glad of threat-induced procedures, rubrics, manageable routines and assessment tools, since pedagogical experience, in students and teachers alike, has not been able to be well cultivated in such circumstances.

Harry Braverman called this process “deskilling”⁴ and showed how it forms a deliberate and strategic part of the maintenance of efficiency in industrial production. It makes workers easily replaceable and compliant, because they are only asked to follow a few simple rules that anyone could follow. They no longer need any cultivated craft or skill or practical experience.

Hence the echoes we hear in David G. Smith’s chilling statement of a commonplace in which we are all variously implicated: “Tell me exactly what it is you want in this assignment.”⁵ Even more chilling is how this echoes a June 4th, 1906 lecture by Fredrick Winslow Taylor, the “father” of what came to be known as the efficiency movement. Taylor was, in a sense, hired to make American schools more efficient by replicating his work in industrial assembly: “In our scheme we do not ask for the initiative of our men. We do not want any initiative. All we want of them is to obey the orders we give them, do what we say, and do it quickly.”⁶


Given Taylor’s words about the “scheme” he insinuated into the organization of schooling, blaming “kids these days” for lack of initiative—while at once living out the legacies of efficiency in how schools are structured—is, frankly, a tragic form of cultural amnesia.

Part Two: “So Permeates the Soil”

Educational rituals reflected, reinforced and actually created belief in the value of learning pursued under conditions of scarcity.\(^7\)

Part of the hard work of understanding curriculum in abundance is having to repeatedly unravel this long legacy of fragmentation and scarcity that comes down to us from the efficiency movement.

The efficiency movement of industrial assembly\(^8\) became codified into how curriculum topics were broken down into separate bits and pieces and sequenced in their standardized reassembly and how, therefore, anything that could not be thus codified—tarrying, for example, over a deck shadow and consider how arcs and circles create a seeming three-dimensionality—was marginalized or eradicated as a threat to efficiency itself.

Rich, thoughtful and rigorous explorations become cast as “frills” which we’ll get to later, if we have time. And, it seems inevitably, there is never time for such things.

Now there is nothing wrong with efficiency per se, but there is something amiss regarding its hidden dominance, especially insofar as it invades living fields of thought, living disciplines of knowledge, and renders them into fragments that seem to—this emphasis is important—bear no inner affinity to each other, each ready for separate, sequenced and standardized assembly.

With each particular curricular fragment, we experience lack, scarcity, and “not enough,” and this propels the subsequent urgency to “get through” the curriculum. And, once locked into this dominant regime, the urgency created by this regime—Taylor suggested that it helps keep workers and, hence, teachers and students on their toes\(^9\)—can only be satisfied by further fragmentation and standardization. It leads, inevitably, to failed, market-driven promises of sure-fire “teaching methods,” with no experience needed for success.

Just do what it says to do.

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\(^7\) Illich (with Cayley), 165.


\(^9\) “Alan Greenspan testified to Congress, explaining [that] the basis for the success of the economy . . . was growing worker insecurity. If workers are beaten down enough and intimidated enough, so that they can no longer ask for decent wages and decent benefits, then it creates a healthy economy by some measure.” From Noam Chomsky, “How to Deal with the Trump Presidency.” Published January 16, 2017 on line: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hw_0Ufzpzs&t=11s.
Addition, we are told, has nothing to do with subtraction. It is taught first because it comes before subtraction in the curriculum guide—in a developmentally determined and standardized sequence of “assembling” mathematical knowledge. This way of thinking, I suggest, is a mathematical disaster, and a pedagogical and ecological one as well.

Part of the work in which I have engaged with teachers is precisely sorting through and studying this legacy—its hold on how the work of teaching and learning is imagined and practiced. We read, for example, Raymond Callahan’s now-classic text, *America, Education and the Cult of Efficiency*, and dozens of other sources that elaborate what has happened to education. To us and our students and to the knowledge entrusted to us in schools. All under this regime.

“Taylor’s thinking so permeates the soil of modern life we no longer realize it’s there.” Hence the gasps of recognition (my own included) and that weird moment of realizing that what seemed to be just “the way things are” in the world of schools is in fact nothing of the sort. We are not dealing with “the real world” under “regimes of scarcity.” Rather, we are dealing with how the world of schools happened to have turned out—one it is fashioned after the model of efficient industrial assembly, with the control, surveillance, acquiescence and obedience it requires.

To understand curriculum in abundance, a weird sort of spell must be broken.

A cautionary note, however. Breaking free of the spell of efficiency leads to an experiential onrush of the great abundance of the world. But it also leads me to experience my own poverty regarding my knowledge of what, now, to do in the face of this reality.

Where do I start? Who should I talk with and about what? How much is enough?

Breaking this spell causes its own sort of momentary panic. But there is good news, here, too. I don’t have to try to gobble up and amass as much experience and knowledge as possible—as quickly as possible.

I recall telling a group of student-teachers that when you glance at a globe and see the Tropic of Cancer and Tropic of Capricorn lines around it, you don’t have to worry. When you are ready and able, the knowledge is right there, patiently waiting for you—of constellations, of maps and map-makers, of the tilt in the Earth’s pole, of seasons, of the tropics (Latin *tropos*, “turning”), of the Sun (Latin *Sol*) stopping (Latin *stasis*) its lowering, turning, and starting to rise at Winter solstice (Latin *Sol-stasis*).

In all of this, it is not a matter of figuring out some new trick and then no longer having to be attentive. Nor is it simply a matter of having amassed some great storehouse of knowledge ready for dispensation.

Rather, it is a matter of *becoming studious* in how we let ourselves experience the world. “We can entrust ourselves to what we are investigating to guide us safely in the quest.” We can glance at deck shadows and know that there is great abundance there, ready for our attention and devotion.

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11 Kanigel, 7.
Part Three: “Our Work Perishes Quickly”

Perhaps it is only when we focus our minds on our machines that time seems short. Time is always running out for machines. They shorten our work by simplifying it and speeding it up, but our work perishes quickly.13

Since no shortened and simplified fragment of industrial assembly requires much attention, this leads to a cascade of hurry and panic over bits and pieces—no one of which requires any careful attention. This then leads to grasping for regimes of management to secure oneself against precisely the rush that is produced and sustained by such regimes.

This phenomenon is palpable in many schools, and in much of contemporary living beyond those walls—not just speed but acceleration. There is a great irony here.

Regimes of scarcity, fragmentation and efficiency produce precisely the sense of time running out that they seem to be designed to ameliorate. Time running out is precisely yet another way in which efficiency induces a sense of scarcity, and thereby an unquestioning obedience and compliance from those under its sway.

Part Four: Monsters in Abundance

“Time is [not] always running out.”14 The real work of teaching and learning does not perish quickly.

Years ago, I was speaking in the school hallway with a kindergarten teacher about monsters. She asked me to come in and talk to her students about it. We sat and tossed around ideas of what you think of when you hear the word: scary, big, hairy, green, under the bed, in that story Papa tells, trolls, bridges, bears in the woods, darkness, being chased, my little brother, run, help, grr!

I diligently wrote all this down on the paper beside me and then told the children that this word, “monster,” comes from an old Latin term, monere, which means “to warn, to show, to teach.”

After we all had a laugh looking over at their teacher, “the monster,” we talked about the fact that monsters aren’t just there to scare you in a story. They are trying to tell you something. Who sees the monster? When do they see the monster? Where does it live? What does the monster want? I asked them to have another look at books they had mentioned and think about what the monsters are up to.

I also suggested that they write down the word, monere, and take it home and tell their parents that they are learning Latin in kindergarten. We laughed and laughed at the thought.

In the weeks and months that followed, I stopped in, saw myriad books, and heard countless tales of heeding, of showing, of teaching.

Six years later. Same school.

A young boy came up to me in the hallway holding the latest Harry Potter volume.

13 Wendell Berry, Standing By Words. (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1983), 76.

“You’re the monsters guy, right?”
He flipped the book open.
“I want to show you something.”

Our work perishes quickly only if it remains in separate fragments in which no future tug of past memory can be experienced. Curriculum in abundance works to see through this situation, to see how any seeming fragment is, in fact, a fragment of something and is, therefore, always already full of relations and kin, full of stored, shared and contested memory and stories, rife with appearances and re-appearances in our lives and living.

And it is reliably and consistently thus even if we don’t have time. Even if we don’t know what might be there for the finding.

Many teachers have voiced an immediate recognition of something like abundance in moments of their day-to-day work with students: when a question or conversation takes flight, when an exploration yields to careful attention and blossoms open into unforeseen territories, when a text or a geometrical figure suddenly gives up its secrets and opens up and out and beyond our immediate ken and asks us to search, to study, to be patient and rigorous and attentive.

When deck shadows suddenly stand there, beckoning me to be all ears.

Given this experience of interdependence, interrelatedness, and abundance, teaching and learning are no longer rushed matters of industrial assembly, but more akin to an ecological acts of recognizing the “places” (Greek topos) we inhabit. How they work, what they ask of us, what holds them together, and what our work might therefore be in them if we are to take good and proper care of these curriculum “topics” (Greek topos).

This is an ancient and always-brand-new experience enjoyed and enjoined far beyond the confines of school: “[the world] compels over and over, and the better one knows it, the more compelling it is.”

Many teachers have voiced an immediate recognition of something like abundance in moments of their day-to-day work with students.

Part Five: And Pythagoras’ Ghost

I think of how intensely patient were Patricia Clifford and Sharon Friesen’s long and winding classes on the surroundings—the “topography”—of the Pythagorean Theorem. Full of images and words and ghosts and relations, diagrams and circles and angles and perpendiculars and angle bisections. Full, too, of tree shadows, now, in the winter sun, longer than they were last summer.

And a slightly astonished 12-year-old boy facing south on the playground, toes at the end of the long shadow, blurted: “But Pythagoras says that something is still the same.” Half a wide-eyed declaration, half a question.

This is why Sharon and Pat and I took on a sort of rescue mission of the idea of “the ba-
We knew from decades of practice that fragments are not basic but are, rather, arcane and abstract outcomes of incredibly elaborate and invasive interventions into living fields, tearing apart any memory of their belonging together, their inherent relatedness. And then, in a great act of forgetting what we have done, these fragments are said to come before and to be more basic than the living field that enticed our attention in the first place.

What comes first, what is basic, is our human draw towards such kinships, such relatedness, wherein my own interest—Latin inter, “in the middle,” plus esse, “of things”—is not only a testament to, but part of that very relatedness. Such “interest” is something that most teachers secretly know but have little recourse to express, that “something awakens our interest—that is really what comes first.”

In this sort of awakening to the abundant interrelatedness of things, the Pythagorean Theorem (or those deck shadows, or adding, or subtracting):

No longer has the character of an object that stands over and against us. We are no longer able to approach this like an object of knowledge, grasping, measuring and controlling. Rather than meeting us in our world, it is much more a world into which we ourselves are drawn, so long as it is not placed into the object-world of producing and marketing.

Each seemingly separate thing or seeming fragment “possesses its own worldliness” and to teach it, to learn it, is to come to know this worldliness.

It is to quite literally re-place it back into all its relations that were, in reality, hidden there all along.

Part Six: School

Young people want to know if, under the cool and calm of efficient teaching and excellent time-on-task ratios, life itself has a chance, or whether the surface is all there is.

Abundance points to a long-forgotten cluster of etymological origins of the word “school”—from the Greek skhole and the Latin schola, meaning both “leisure” and “a holding back, a keeping clear.” The great arts of teaching and learning are to be conducted, in part, away from the day-to-day fray of immediate, impinging, hurrying concerns, anxieties, distractions, renderings, wall-building, and threats that are not indigenous to the workings of the topics being explored.

In such leisure and holding back, it is possible to notice and to confirm how good—how mathematically rich and mathematically abundant—is that 12-year-old boy’s questioning declaration over a lengthening tree shadow that has somehow also remained the same. Yes, Pythagoras is flourishing right here underfoot, right here in the arc of seasons and sun and shadows, and right by your toes at the end of that shadow. Even this mathematical Theorem is not just an isolated and memorizable fragment but also a memorable and befitting reminder of a living field of relations in isolation from which it would not properly be what it is.
There is no hurry here, no time running out, no scarcity, no lack. It does not need to be doled out, surveilled, and monitored. It has its own indigenous relatedness and rigorousness, its own orderliness, its own tale to tell. It is not used up by our attention. It does not become scarce but precisely the opposite. The more we learn of it, the more we know of the inexhaustibility of its relations and kin, and this sense of being inevitably “outplayed” is part of the deep pleasure of such work. Just for a moment, my own anxieties, wrapped up as they are in the distractions and rush of “producing and marketing,” can let go, out into the leisurely time of this rich place which, of itself, does the work of holding back and keeping clear.

In the school-as-schola, the living field of knowledge being investigated can flourish of its own accord. I have called this elsewhere a “pedagogy left in peace.”

Part Seven: From Little Panics to Terror

Animals under various forms of threat—the continuous presence of predators, lack of adequate food, drought, and the like—tend to play less and less. They tend, quite naturally, to revert to those kinds of activities that will aid them in gaining comparative control over their environment, activities that involve little or no risk.

People whose governing habit is the relinquishment of power, competence and responsibility, and whose characteristic suffering is the anxiety of futility, make excellent spenders. They are the ideal consumers. By inducing in them little panics of boredom, powerlessness, mortality, paranoia, they can be made to buy virtually anything that is “attractively packaged.”

We have been schooled in these governing habits. We have become habituated. The promise of efficiency and its consequent cultivation of a sense of lack, of scarcity, and the need for obedience, dovetails easily with the never-fully-fulfilled promise of market logic.

Early in the 20th century, once efficiency movements in industry reached a certain threshold of increased production, the desire to consume more and more quickly became subject to equally hidden and systematic psychological manipulation, using the same easily induced sense of lack, scarcity, and panic, threat and never-quite-fulfilled promises of relief.

So, then, this, from Kevin O’Leary. O’Leary, a recent candidate for leadership of the Conservative Party of Canada, was affiliated with The Learning Company, currently owned by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, one of North America’s largest providers of packaged educational products, “learn to read” series, and educational video games such as Carmen Sandiego and Reader Rabbit.

I’m all for children, but I want to make a buck. I am Carmen Sandiego. I am Reader Rabbit. People will do anything for their children to help them in math and reading scores. I made a fortune just servicing that market. I love the terror in a mother’s heart when she sees her child fall behind in reading. I made a fortune from that.27

I encourage practicing teachers and parents to read it carefully and with an open heart, because something vaguely suspected is finally being said clearly, unequivocally, and out loud, and for that we should be oddly grateful.

Part Eight: From Terror to Perpetual War

“Given . . . abundance, scarcity must be a function of boundaries.”28

The insistence on well-wrought boundaries and the building of walls is a function of feeling invaded, vulnerable, and under threat. It is also a function of the hoarding by those in power of what is of value and the subsequent manipulation of scarcity and threat as a means to deflect attention away from the realities of such manipulative functioning. Thus maintaining those regimes of power and profit.

“I made a fortune from that.”

We have seen a lot of this recently. How easy it is to induce and manipulate, especially if we remain immersed in the roiling distortions and distractions of attention, unable to hold back or keep clear (schola) enough to think through what is being perpetrated and to what end, and to whose benefit.

“I love the terror in a mother’s heart.”29

“I love the poorly educated.”30

This suggests why the issue of curriculum in abundance is far more relevant than it was 11 years ago.

A great inversion has occurred, where a reliable means of relieving this sense of embattlement, of breaking its spell, of holding back and keeping clear our knee-jerk panics and anxieties—the school as schola—is now often identified as one of the causes of embattlement.

This inversion works like this. Regimes of scarcity are regimes of threat. And, in light of the retractions and subsequent xenophobic suspicions produced and sustained by threat-consciousness, any suggestion of abundance feels like a breach, a border-violation, a counter-threat, an uprising:

Education becomes akin to a sometimes overt, but more often subtle war on the very possibility of unanticipated “uprising.” Natality itself becomes experienced as a perennial insurgent threat to security that must be planned for and secured against. Education becomes cast as akin to a counterinsurgent war on terror.31


29 O’Leary’s quote referenced above.

30 From a speech of Donald Trump, where he stated that, “I love the poorly educated.” Published February 23, 2016. Accessed on-line: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vpdt7omPoa0.

Those who suggest abundance, show affection for it, and demonstrate a desire to live one’s life in its sway, become suspect:

Trying to act on the belief (inside or outside of schools) that the matters at hand need more intellectual subtlety than purged and clarified exaggerations-under-threat allow, starts to appear as an act of betrayal or sedition. Believing that there is more complexity to the story... is to be branded a conspiracy theorist. Wanting to know something more than the simplistic, threat-induced clarities... is [considered] egregious. Knowledge and its pursuit become experienced as a threat to security.\(^{32}\)

Part Eight: Elephants and “A Terrible Trial”

We ought to be like elephants in the noon-time sun in summer, when they are tormented by heat and thirst and catch sight of a cool lake. They throw themselves into the water with the greatest pleasure and without a moment’s hesitation. In just the same way, for the sake of ourselves and others, we should give ourselves joyfully to the practice.\(^{33}\)

I felt compelled to leave in this scene of elephants plunging into cool water as a way to counterbalance a bit of the dourness that is being discussed here. The work of studying the world in its abundance is full of great and difficult and repeated joys—of discovery, of reliable and time-tested insight, full of stings and little

This is not New Age froth or emotionally fraught, “liberal” touchy-feely-ness, or do-whatever-you-want-ness. It is the old and reliable warrant of thinking carefully and well, of scholarly work, of evidence, of good and practicable examples, attentiveness, and so on. And this is sometimes simpler than it might seem. I recall having a complex conversation over recess with a student-teacher regarding the ins and outs of multiplying by fractions and how hard it is to articulate, and by the time we noticed, the students in this grade-five class had returned and were sitting quietly behind us, leaning forward a bit into a mid-conversation.

The student-teacher asked me, “what should I do now?” The answer was weirdly simple.

We should not now do something else.

“Let’s tell them about the conversation we were just having and see what happens.”

Entrusting ourselves.

So there we were, the chalkboard full of scrawls and examples and things crossed out, standing up, facing fresh faces just in from the cold, stood up into the hard, joyous work of seeking wisdom about this matter, together in its safe and reliable company.

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I had the great good fortune of ending the formal part of my career co-teaching, with Jackie Seidel, at the University of Calgary, two clusters of graduate courses that explored the matters mentioned here. These involved talking together, reading together, taking and passing notes back and forth, writing, publishing, conference presentations, retreats, gathering and re-gathering. Since those courses ended, some of us have continued weekly meetings of refuge and comfort in its deepest sense—cultivating “common strength” against the forces of fret and distraction. When surrounded in the frays of schooling and trying to just get by, reminders are important, commiseration is vital. Just seeing each other’s faces was sometimes enough to invoke a whispered, “oh, yes, right.”

I end with part of an interview with Wendell Berry, conducted by Bill Moyers. It was one of the many “texts” that we carefully “read” and “re-read” in our gatherings. Advice, here, about impending ecological troubles, but equally a heartfelt message to teachers and students in schools about the portend of curriculum in abundance:

This can’t be hurried; this is the dreadful situation that young people are in. The situation you’re in is a situation that is going to call for a lot of patience, and to be patient in an emergency is a terrible trial. The important thing to do is to learn all you can about where you are, to make common cause with that place, and then, resigning yourself, become patient enough to work with it over a long time. And then, what you do is increase the possibility that you’ll make a good example. And what we’re looking for in this is good examples.35

I would only re-emphasize that this work needs the company of others—the long and mixed ancestries of thinking and writing. Ways from our elders, the fresh company of the youngest of children and newest of students, and the affectionate vigor of colleagues. Those who will treat my slim patience and other failings with some patience, and let me do the same with them, over this common work.

I ask for the same from the bustling moose that just barged through last night, or from that whiff of stale smoke from the British Columbia fires, or the deep waters current in Houston, all that serve as reminders, as gateways, into our abundant and dependent co-arising.

I want to push this one more step: there is no emergency here. Seeing through this manipulated semblance in good company is itself a terrible trial worth the work. In, and only in, this frail and finite mutuality lives curriculum in abundance.


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