Two Arced Fishes and a Raven’s Eye: Thoughts on Selfies, Pandemics, and a Door, Ajar

David W. Jardine
Preamble: Two Arced Fishes

Sometimes
Selfies betray arced fishes.
Imaginaries
Far more bright and brilliant than the imaging self’s self-regard.

Unbeknownst. Face-darkening.
Swum behind one’s back.
It’s how to write, I’ve heard
Tell. Eyecast
Back and around
To what got meant
Even if I didn’t sense I meant it. Even if I didn’t mean it.

Arced fishes
Betraying a giveaway
Right when,
Could be especially when
I thought it was just me.

Collective Stress Disorder

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. They revert, so to speak, to what is tried and true, what is most familiar.¹

Finding out what we have imagined to be most tried and true and most familiar, isn’t necessarily a “plain clean gift.”² Like all opportunities to find out:

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.³

Right here is the pedagogical obligation: finding ourselves thus pressed requires deliberation, parsing, thinking, studying, remembering, searching, writing, listening, reading, scholarship, if we are to avoid simply being swept up in this roil.

The temptation to be swept up and feel the temporary exhilaration of getting nothing more than “aroused,” has become almost de rigueur, fashionable, customary, and ordinary. After all, under the long, lingering, diffuse “threat” of COVID-19, what can easily get stirred up is long-buried ideas, anxieties, knee-jerks, trigger-fingers, unspoken prejudices, unuttered presumptions, long-forgotten, mixed, and contested histories, justices and injustices, all housed down inside the moist underbellies of consciousness.

And these things can easily pile themselves upon smoky skies from unprecedented fires, flagpoles used to break windows, knees on necks, fake news about fake news, nameless buried children,⁴ and on and on. Things going on

³ Hillman, “Notes on Opportunism,” 94.


7 Ivan Illich & David Cayley, Ivan Illich in Conversation, 127.
“A Consciousness that Must Leave the Door Ajar”

Interpretation [the hermeneutic root-gesture of pedagogical untangling] is focussed . . . both on the entrance of the young/ the initiate into the world and upon the restoration and renewal of the world that can ensue from such entrance. As with the figure of Hermes, interpretation stands at this portal, constituted by “a consciousness that must leave the door ajar,” ready for the arrival of the “new blood” (the next teacher’s/ principal’s/ child’s/ student-teacher’s tale) that will not be left to its own devices, but will help transform the world and make it new.

Restoration and renewal.

The arrival of these moments of stilling can be great gifts, hard to handle. The good news is that the bad news, here, can be good news—it forces my hand, shows me my patience, composure, trust, paranoia, exhaustion, suspicions. Our circumstances, as teachers, as students beckons our careful attention. COVID-19 has been a terribly passive and patient teacher along with all its collective surroundings of stress and strain. It shows me how easily I can be preyed upon by click-baits. How easily I can discover how I’ve been entrenched, how I’ve forgotten what my work is after all these years. Discover, as David Loy put it, that I have, we have “bound ourselves

Utterly embarrassing for me to read. Things written years ago and still I fall prey. Stop. Still yourself. Untangle first. Always a good idea. Otherwise, we lose our way.

I lose my way.

9 Ivan Illich & David Cayley, Ivan Illich in Conversation, 127.
15 Hillman, “Notes on Opportunism,” 98.
without a rope.” This trick is age-old. It shows me that it would be so easy to simply revert to the old saw of what’s “tried and true.”

The door is ajar, the opportunity at hand, of rethinking schooling, of releasing ourselves from its pent-up fears and worn-out inheritances and prejudices and presumptions. But equally on hand is the threat-based, knee-jerk, unthought “idea” of simply “getting back to normal.”

“If It Actually Exists, it Must be Possible”

Whenever you get into this kind of discussion, one of the first things you are charged with from some corner is that “well, you want to go backwards.” So, you have to answer it over and over again, but still people keep raising it. Jerry Brown asked me the same question in a discussion about three weeks ago; he said, “You’re going against the grain of things all the time, aren’t you?” I said, “it’s only a temporary turbulence I’m setting myself against. Living close to earth, living more simply, living more responsibly, are all quite literally in the grain of things.” It’s coming back to us one way or another, like it or not. . . . [It is] not a preaching but . . . a demonstration hidden within . . . deeper harmonies and deeper simplicities, which are essentially sanities, even though they appear irrelevant, impossible, behind us.18

It’s coming back to us one way or another.

This is what can happen if the anxious, mindless rushing of schooling gets interrupted. There is a lot of talk about the vital need for kids to get back to school because of how important it is. I agree. But it need not be the same old efficiency-model, panic-based acceleration, and exhaustion. What we’ve witnessed is that there is no necessity to the things we have been doing, only the often-numbing weight of what we’ve inherited.

One of the most pernicious and intransigent and most deeply buried falsehoods squirming around with those fishes is that schools as they are contemporarily often constituted—the ones we want to “get back to”—are simply “the real world”:

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” [“the normal” we long to get back to] . . . Rather, we are dealing with how the world of schools happened to have turned out—once it is fashioned after the model of efficient industrial assembly, with the control, surveillance, acquiescence, and obedience it requires. To understand [the opportunity in front of us in this COVID-19 interregnum] . . . a weird sort of spell must be broken. A cautionary note, however. Breaking free of this spell can lead 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.19

Schools, “normal” schools, can cleave towards “a demonstration hidden within . . . deeper harmonies and deeper simplicities,” ones more in line the etymologies of that word “school” itself. Consider this: School, Latin schola, “leisure for learning.” Greek skhole, originally “a holding back, a keeping clear.”20 This is what can happen if the frantic forward push of our living gets

20 See http://www.etymonline.com, entry under “school.”
paused. This is the terrible, tough, pedagogical gift that COVID-19 has offered us.

Schooling will always be difficult and hard work no matter how you do it. Finding a way into the re-emergent harmonies and simplicities of the abundant relations of living disciplines and living fields of relations, human and more-than-human, is at least a difficulty that bears with it the potential of repeated uprisings of great relief and joy:

I am not sure I have much more to say that hasn’t been already said over and over again by so many. The complex and difficult insights of ecological alertness are known and have been for aeons. The complex and difficult insights of how education might shape itself in light of this alertness has been well documented in recent decades. Witness the papers in this collection.21 Witness how those referred to have their own family trees listed. Follow them, too. Find your way. It’s a lush, tough field. I’ve witnessed dozens of schools where these matters of teaching and learning and curriculum ecologically imagined are accepted and practiced.

***

After all, it is not as if curriculum guides don’t describe living fields of knowledge, locales, places, terrains wont of attention and affection. The invitation is lying nearby, right on-hand. The theory has become well-wrought and is burgeoning with new stings and insight as we speak. The practices have been well-documented. But, as per Bill Callahan,22 “God’s face on the water, though plain to see, it’s still hard to read.”23

There we are. Learning to read, all over again.

I recall, for example, the utterly strange example of the following list that was common at the beginning of the pandemic, about what to think of this, about what to do, to understand, to study, to remember, to lament. All of these are no longer live links, but these are the actual titles given to the online stories. This is a very small sample:

- Spreads of lions laying on warm paved roads in South Africa
- Sea turtles thriving on empty Florida beaches
- Wild goats taking over Welsh towns
- Squirrels taking over Santa Monica parks
- Sheep wandering golf courses in England
- Wild boars on the streets of Barcelona
- Shoals of fish back in bluer and clearer canals of Venice
- Europe breathing fresher air
- Nitrogen Dioxide levels plunging in northern China

This should give pause to the rush to get back to an unthought, knee-jerk “normal” when placed alongside Gary Snyder’s insistences (see above) about the grain of things: This pandemic, and all the sundry surrounding panic-based, media-overkill-click-bait-based hysterics hopefully have allowed moments of pause, because the rich and abundant fields of relations that house us and that are entrusted to teachers and students in schools are simply awaiting us. And I have to remind myself not to get caught up in the warmth of that list, because it now must include current California fires and unprecedented New York/New Jersey floodings and deaths and damage. Reminders, all. Teachers.

---

21 Referring here to a special issue of a special issue of the Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies 18, no. 2, ”Walking: Attuning to an Earthly Curriculum,” https://jacs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jacs. See also the previous issue of this journal, and so many other classroom examples with their rigors and delights and difficulties.


23 David W. Jardine, What We Know Full Well,” Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies 18, no. 2: 38.
Make no mistake, then. This is no Romantic joyride. This work often hurts. One’s new students, in many cases, are already well-schooled in being schooled, and have been taught to not be taught this way:

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.” 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.” 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.24

And, let’s face it, surrounding circumstances and panics and presumptions and parental worries and arced fishes are not necessarily working in our favor towards favouring exploring abundant, living fields of relations as a way to proceed.

Working this way is not easy. It is not quick. And, in our current circumstances, it might seem like an emergency. So here is a soft reminder that we have companions in these matters:

This can’t be hurried; this is the dreadful situation that young people are in [that, in fact, we are all 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.25

It is laborious, but it is good labor, honorable labor for teachers and students alike. To rigorously seek out the threads, the connections, the details, to push back against the tendencies to fragment, to trivialize, to accelerate, is tough work in which we need to find comfort—common strength, as goes the etymology—in each other.

But again, don’t get light-headed, here. There was a study done involving 26 elementary and secondary schools, 12,800 students in Alberta, Canada, that demonstrated that following the ways that a disciplinary, living field of knowledge is practiced instead of the old industrial model of schooling lead to markedly higher performances on Provincial Standardized Tests26. I gave this study to a principal who dismissed it out-of-hand, saying “we just don’t have time for that sort of stuff.” My dear colleagues and co-authors, Patricia Clifford and Sharon Friesen, and I used to call this “the old list of “yeah-buts” . . .

Up against the too often pronounced exhaustion and desperation and despair of “this sort of thing is not possible in my school/with my sort of students/in this part of town/at this grade level/with this school administration/in this school board/in this subject area/with these parents/under these economic conditions,” and so, on and on, we offer an old and pointed response of our late colleague, teacher and friend, Patricia

Clifford: "if it actually exists, it must be possible." 27

An Old, Familiar Face

Perception of opportunities requires a sensitivity given through one’s own wounds. Here, weakness provides the kind of hermetic, secret perception critical for adaptation to situations. The weak place serves to open us to what is in the air. We feel through our pores which way the wind blows. We turn with the wind; trimmers. An opportunity requires . . . a sense . . . which reveals the daimon of a situation. The daimon of a place in antiquity supposedly revealed what the place was good for, its special quality and dangers. The daimon was thought to be a familiaris of the place. To know a situation, one needs to sense what lurks in it. 28

This is the lesson I carried into all those university classes I taught and into those school classrooms where I ventured with student-teachers and on my own in friendships with teachers in schools, in graduate classes, and so on. The open door is everywhere. Every topic is a potential clue, a possible hint. Every topic listed in every curriculum guide is the centre of an elaborate and elaborate-able and venture-able field of living relations. Opening up those fields for our students—for ourselves as well—is at the heart and in the grain of things pedagogical.

As a general pronouncement, this can seem simply overwhelming and chaos-inducing and Romantic and unrealistic and frightening and woozy and all that. It can also seem subjective and “letting kids do what they want” chaos and so on.

It is none of these.

These, too, are knee-jerks that are understandable if you have not experienced and witnessed this sort of pedagogy. What is always needed to make it a viable, practicable matter, is a good example of “a demonstration hidden” always nested here and here and here.

So here we go, an old, familiar familiaris squat on the back railing, a frequent visitor, utterly easy to ignore or let glide by.

Normal.

“Right here, where it, where it seems impossible that one life even matters” 29 comes the moment that teachers understand on their good days, and students, too, when something heretofore simply fly-by stops


and stills us into stopping and stilling and whiling. Just imagine, for a moment, the multiple stories to be told, the new stories to be ventured, photos to be taken, feathers to be microscoped and drawn by hand, Latin etymologies of Corvus corax, myriad cultural depictions—more stories than could be read in a lifetime, the sciences of flight, the details of habitats, of territoriality, the analogies of this to tribes and political allegiances. Lifespans (10-15 years). Wingspans (100-150 centimetres). Typologies. Kinds. Relations. Linnaeus’s branching work. Relations: Jays, Crows, Magpies.

Monogamous, this picture being one of a pair that has been around for quite a while.

My wife and heard they were nesting nearby, and the neighbours saw four little heads popping up. We thought of how cute it might be if the parents brought the kids over to our feeder. Well, they did, full grown, loud, boisterous, each vying for position, chasing others away, pecking and yakking. We knew they were territorial, so we knew, sooner or later, the “kids” would disperse. We took the feeder down temporarily and mom and dad have, for now, returned.

Whiling over this and all its adjacent fields of relations is itself an extraordinary “normality” that is commonplace as can be. We can all recognize it from those times where something of “interest” (Latin root, inter- and -esse, essentially, “being in the middle of something”) has grabbed our attention and our attention deepens as we continue to explore. This is not some sort of subjective, touchy-feely flight of fancy made up on the spot, this idea of whiling and the time it takes. It is a deeply scholarly matter. It is a matter that teachers will recognize when something “clicks” in their classroom and students start, so to speak, “leaning in” towards the object fluttering open before their eyes:

It is not merely one’s "taking time" to linger over something, as in the slackening or slowing down to contemplate. [This whiling] temporality . . . is not a function of lackadaisical, meandering contemplation, least of all passive in any way, but is a function of the fullness and intensity of attention and engagement. 30 (Ross 2006, p. 109)

We become enthralled and "enveloped in a time that does not pass, a time described by Hans-Georg Gadamer with the German term Verweilen—translatable as "tarrying" or "whiling" or "gathering." 32

In this tarrying the contrast with the merely pragmatic realms of understanding becomes clear. The Weile [the “while” in Verweilen, tarrying] has this very special temporal structure—a structure of being moved, which one nevertheless cannot describe merely as duration. In it we tarry. 33

This possibility of, shall we say, "absorption" and being moved and addressed and, shall we say, summoned or beckoned by the work itself, is phenomenologically familiar. When the work undertaken is worthwhile, the inquiry, the topic, the images, the ideas, the story truly takes hold of us. It is not an object that stands opposite us which we look at in hope of seeing through it to an intended conceptual meaning. Just the reverse. The work is an Ereignis—an event that “appropriates us” into itself. It jolts us, it knocks us over, and sets up a world of its own, into which we are drawn, as it were. 34

Difficult to grasp, but the irony is that it is worth taking the time to think about and study this temporality that teachers already understand when a group of students get taken hold of by a

31 Ross, “The Temporality of Tarrying in Gadamer,” 106.
32 Jardine, Radiant Beings, 250.
34 Gadamer, Conversation, 71.
topic, and idea, an image, a story, a mathematical diagram. We know this from our own lives as well, this weird uplift. We can all find it in ourselves when we linger over something that opens our hearts, sparks our ideas, in which we find companions who also love this place, this thing, this idea, this field, old ancestors found lingering there with advice and warnings and details. The work of art or words of a student that brought me to a halt on day. Beautiful things:

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting.35

Or this from the Prose Edda chapter entitled, “Gylfaginning: Here Begins the Beguiling of Gylfi”:

The ravens sit on [Odin's] shoulders and say into his ear all the tidings which they see or hear; they are called thus: Huginn and Muninn. He sends them at day-break to fly about all the world, and they come back at undern-meal; thus he is acquainted with many tidings. Therefore men call him Raven-God, as is said:

Huginn and Muninn hover each day
The wide earth over,
I fear for Huginn lest he fare not back,—
Yet watch I more for Muninn.36

Hugin means “thought” and Muninn means “memory.”

I fear for thought lest it not come to me. Covid panics making thinking tough to do; sometimes they make it seems like a frill or frivolous. It isn’t. It is difficult to remain alert in the clustering gatherings that classrooms can be, difficult to remember to seek out the threads enthralling us, that cluster around each and every topic in each and every curriculum guide. Panics can make such seeking seem superfluous, make us long for clean and clear efficiencies. It is not superfluous and the erasures that come from efficiency, that come from panic and exhaustion, despoil the rich and living topics entrusted to teachers and students in schools. This is why I always encourage teachers, to find a spot to calm oneself, to look, to read, to study, to think and remember and gather the threads, and, if they are able and inclined, to write, to publish ones writing, thereby to give support and comfort to their fellow travellers.37 To re-cite: “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.”38

I watch out for memory traces in that Raven’s arrival. I know there will be doors, ajar, if I can sit, still.

And then a poem fragment sent out in a September 9, 2020 tweet by Brick Books (his publisher) in honour of the passing of Don Domanski, another teacher of mine I never met, yet met:

I try to follow Meister Eckhart’s advice
Do exactly what you would do if you felt most secure
sometimes it takes
sometimes it doesn’t
meanwhile saints
graze on the begonias
meanwhile ravens go to the edges of the earth
and return with our hearts in their beaks.

The ones we though were in our bodies
The ones we though were redeemed.

36 See https://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/pre/pre04.htm, 51.
37 See, for example, Jackie Seidel & David W. Jardine, The Ecological Heart of Teaching: Radical Tales of Refuge and Renewal for Classrooms and Communities (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishers, 2016), which contains writings of classroom teachers pondering and practicing this sort of work.
38 Wendell Berry & Bill Moyers, “Wendell Berry on his Hopes for Humanity.”
Don Domanski, “In the Dream of Yellow Birches”

Jackie Seidel and I used Domanski’s book as one of our required texts in a recent graduate class. One student, understandably, asked if we needed to ask for special permission to do so.

A Lilac Iris

*At the center of a stone or at the axis of a tree there’s the silence of a world turning.*

**The center is everywhere.**

Of all things, COVID-19 has most disastrously aggravated our feeling of time running out, of all this having taken too long, of stretched and snapped patience. Many have suffered in this lingering, no doubt about it.

But again, there is a hint. Many teachers have expressed to me in this meanwhile their desire to rethink the old familiaris of school. Re-think what might be found in the eyes in mirrors, or the ones of Ravens:

I’ve never noticed this before, a lilac iris, probably coloured out of reflects of the surroundings. A quick look on Google Images shows that this reflect is not frequent. Now what?

There is no “everyday,” no “normal” day. We all pretend there is. We all add to the myth. It’s an act of pretense which helps us survive, to feel there’s ground under our feet, when we know full well that beneath that ground there is an eternity of stars and galaxies, a great unknown which,

We don’t need to be afraid, even though this might feel like a sort of misty dissolving or the like. It isn’t. It is “too much to take,” but it need not be swallowed whole. Just take that as your starting point and *let it be the center* of your ventures. That will help you settle down from this sometimes too-large invocation of living relations.

A lilac iris probably reflecting its surroundings.

The fires in the West are teachers. The smoke that stings teaches as it stings. The First Nations children buried in unmarked graves would like a word with you. The drought across the prairies has a lesson all planned, as do the European floods, as does COVID-19, as does January 6, 2021. And, of course –get used to this— between submitting this paper and editing the final copy, California fires, East coast US floods, and we had 18 days of 33 degrees Celsius straight with no rain this summer.

Teachers every single one.

I’ve often advised student-teachers that when they move from the hard work of having elaborated a living field with their students, on to the next topic, they will, of necessity or at least

---

frequently, run smack into a solid wall all over again.

Starting all over again. What shall we say about those unmarked graves, knowing full well that simply not mentioning them says something loud and clear that is hard to read.

You can become practiced at this over time, but our everyday lives mitigate against such openness and necessitate setting off, deep breath, all over again, into the work of remembering and thinking, Odin’s lovely, horrible pair of familiars. Holding back. Keeping clear.

Even the well-being of my inhaling is rained down from the trees overhead. And this said as the smoke from fires to the West choke a bit. “I can’t breathe” comes round all over again as a consequence, all over again, of what we have trouble facing, behind our backs and right before our eyes, all over again.

And to sit here, writing, and you, reading, all over again, textus, weaving. “Threads interweaving, criss-crossing” 43

Certainly one can call this process a "while" [Weilen], but this is something that nobody measures and that one does not find to be either boring or merely entertaining. The name I have for the way in which this event happens is "reading." With reading one does not imagine . . . that one can already do it. In reality, one must learn how . . . Now the word Lesen 44 carries within it a helpful multiplicity of harmonic words, such as gathering together [Zusammenlesen], picking up commonplace in Anglican church services, of saying "today’s lesson is taken from Matthew," meaning both literally "a reading from Matthew" but also reading that reading for its "lesson."

44 Lesen translates as "read," a German kin to the English word "lesson"—I think, for example, of an old
[Auflesen], picking out [Auslesen], or to sort out [verlesen]. All of these are associated with "harvest" (Lesen), that is to say, the harvest of grapes, which persist in the harvest. The word Lesen also refers to something that begins with spelling out words, if one learns to write and read, and again we find numerous echo words. One can start to read a book [lesen] or finish up reading it [auslesen], one can read further in it [weiterlesen], or just check into it [nachlesen], or one can read it aloud [vorsagen]. All of these point towards the harvest that is gathered in and from which one takes nourishment.45

Lesson plans: harvesting, sorting out, gathering together. Wonderful things to re-consider in the face of the grain of things.

**An Old, Familiar Face Takes Nourishment**

So, then, whence the lilac in this Raven’s pupil? It is unclear. But as per one of my lingering habits, I zoomed in on that lilac eye photo, just to see what I can see, like the bear who came over the mountain. And, well, whaddya know! See? White shirt with sky-blue stripes. Pale skin halo pinkish, sparse-long white-grey hair, elbows akimbo with camera held up, blue/white striped shirt below, pixilated. That’s me in the spotlight, losing my religion (as the saying goes), right in the midst of a lilac arcing eye eying that very spotting.

Be still. Click.

---

Further Reading


