The Refusal of Wonder

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There are many things said to *enforce* learning, such as the accountability movement. There are many things said to *measure* learning, such as standardized tests. There are also many things, usually in contrast, said to *inspire* learning, such as — as Todd Rowen's paper suggests — wonder.

In his essay, Rowen likens wonder to certain childhood experiences, the Kantian Sublime, Lyotard's account of art, the experience of culture shock, and the Socratic "torpedo fish." He emphasizes the transformative functions of wonder, observing that learning "[r]equires an uncomfortable break with an established framework in order to adopt a new and expanded perspective." It is certainly true, as Rowen states, that "consuming states of apprehension are more vital to education than widely acknowledged." What often passes for education instead simply narrows horizons, encourages routine, shuts down reflection, and, in Arendtian terms, reproduces thoughtlessness. What is often asked of teachers is either to compete with that other Great Educator, Television, and become "edutainers,"[1] or to provide "facts" or procedural knowledge directly translatable into skills for commercial application. Under such circumstances, immeasurable and unpredictable experiences such as wonder are easily overlooked and forgotten.

And yet, wonder is so important that, as Arendt confirms quoting Plato, it is the "beginning of all philosophy."[2] And since, as Rowen shows, wonder is intrinsic to education, it can be said that it constitutes a bridge between philosophy and education. I want to suggest that, in so bridging, wonder points towards the possibilities of transformation.

Since I agree with Rowen's central argument and assertions, our differences are not deep and incommensurable. My critique might be what Freud called a "narcissism of small differences," a case of reserving our most virulent oppositions for those who resemble us the most; we feel threatened not by the unknown Other, but by the nearly-me.[3] More specifically, I find myself largely in agreement on his interpretation of Arendt, emphasis on the importance of wonder, and corresponding concern that it is often overlooked in much of what passes for education. Accordingly what I offer is not a critique of his understanding of wonder or interpretations of these key thinkers, but a discussion of the limits of wonder, drawing from my teaching experience to illustrate different responses to encounters with new knowledge.

The Politics of Wonder: Anger and Refusal

My first point is that, while Rowen is right to observe that wonder is not merely passive, its transformative possibilities are not exclusively subjective. Thus, even if or when wonder effectively stirs one's passions, it does so in a profoundly political manner. As Megan Boler argues in *Feeling Power*, emotions are not merely private

or interior experiences, but are also invariably political. She explores the complex terrain of our emotional investments in, and attachments to, particular worldviews. These investments and attachments run deep, and are not easily abandoned or altered. When they are, or when some minimal changes do occur, intense emotions often follow.[4]

In his analysis of wonder, Rowen draws primarily from Arendt's book *Thinking,* concerned primarily with a variety of interior and cognitive processes. But, Arendt is most notably a theorist of the public realm, and in *The Human Condition* she argues that we are first and foremost *zoon politikon*, animals of the *polis*. Thus, her concern is not with our private or subjective experience, but with their public dimensions and political possibilities. My second point is that, since wonder is deeply associated with the political, it may well be "refused." I want to suggest that the encounter with what Rowen calls "a totality that is beyond observation" is not necessarily transformative, but instead may involve feelings of anger and aggression. Often, what we experience before that which is overwhelming is not numbness, but outright hostility. This occurs when we encounter something that is not simply unfamiliar, but downright offensive; not simply different, but repugnant; not only incomprehensible, but self-implicating.

In this experience, suffering is involved not as *pathos* in the sense of "happening to me," as Rowen suggests, but in the more traditional and common "hurting me." In such pedagogical circumstances, students do not display wonder, but may become indignant, resentful, and even violent. The student does not feel the need for change or for anything new; s/he is not seeking out transformation. They are not numb, but offended; the sting of the torpedo fish has not induced paralysis, but violence.

Thus, transformation can be "refused," and the second moment of Rowen's account of transformation, satisfaction or pleasure, may not materialize. In a Philosophy of Education Society essay in 1997, Megan Boler called this "Calvin's Refusal," after the cartoon character returned a book loaned by his mother, stating "[i]t's complicating my life. Don't get me any more." Instead of wonder, Boler suggests that "[w]hen new information is introduced that suggests a radical alternative to our accepted and/or common-sense ways of thinking and being, how do we react? Refusal is certainly one possible reaction."[5]

Gert Biesta suggests that, like this refusal to be disturbed, there is a risk and even violence inherent to pedagogical experiences. He suggests that "there is the risk that you will learn something that you rather didn't want to learn,"[6] that "there is a violent dimension to education…in that it asks difficult questions and creates difficult situations."[7]

For example, in a lesson on consumerism in a Business Ethics course I recently taught, we researched the third world labor practices of the students' favorite shoemaker. At one point many students were fuming, and attacked me with "what's wrong with my Nikes?" Others in the class suggested that people like working in sweatshops. This encounter with new and difficult knowledge did not provoke wonder, but aggressive and often personal attacks, creating a palpable classroom

tension. We would do well to remember the fate of Socrates at the hands of the Athenian *demos*. At times, I feel lucky to escape the classroom unscathed.

Wonder and the Possible

Strangely, this experience of anger and refusal also parallels a remarkable sense of apathy. What I find perhaps most striking about many of these same students is their sense of the impossibility — even absurdity — of social transformation. How ironic that a society based on freedom apparently denies us the freedom to change that same society. On those few occasions when students concede that all is not well with modern capitalist society, they often retreat into apathy and indifference. "What can you do? That's just the way it is," they say. Is this the numbness induced by the torpedo fish? I suggest not, because in this case the students understand the message, but deliberately retreat into passivity, not because they are shocked and immobilized, but because they experience a collective impotence. Thus emerges the deeper need for wonder.

An account of political alternatives or new worldviews can inspire wonder as a possibility towards which we might strive. I am not speaking of mere utopianism or speculation about an unattainable and hypothetical promised land to come, but a concrete and tangible alternative to the present configuration of political life. Wonder might inspire such a possibility, and help overcome the prevalent sense of collective impotence.

Thus, perhaps we experience wonder not only before the incomprehensible, as Rowen suggests, but also in the face of the possible. A classroom environment that encourages wonder must then always protect the possibility of possibilities. As Derrida has it, "we must do and think the impossible. If only the possible happened, nothing more would happen."[8]

To return to Socratic metaphors: he often described himself as a "midwife" to new knowledge, alluding to the pain and even trauma in learning. Such suffering is a precursor to new life, both literally for the child and symbolically for the learner. Perhaps, then, this is not such a "narcissism of small differences" after all.

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1. Jane Kenway and Elizabeth Bullen, *Consuming Children: Education-Entertainment-Advertising* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2001).

2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 302.

3. Sigmund Freud, *The Taboo of Virginity*, in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,* vol. 7, eds. James Strachey and Angela Richards (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 265.

4. Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 176.

5. Megan Boler, "Taming the Labile Other," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1997,* ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998).

6. Gert Biesta, "Against Learning: Reclaiming a Language for Education in an Age of Learning," *Nordisk Pedagogik* 23 (2004): 77.

7. Ibid., 79.

8. Geoffrey Bennington, "Politics and Friendship: A Discussion with Jacques Derrida," University of Sussex, December 1997, http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/frenchthought/derrida.htm.