

## Thou's Sacred Ways: A Case of Relational Learning for Democratic Self-Formation

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Grandfather,  
Look at our brokenness.  
We know that in all creation  
Only the human family  
Has strayed from the Sacred Way.  
We know that we are the ones  
Who are divided  
And we are the ones  
Who must come back together  
To walk in the Sacred Way.  
Grandfather,  
Sacred One,  
Teach us love, compassion, and honor  
That we may heal the earth  
And heal each other.

—*Ojibwe prayer*

I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting.<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to walk in the Sacred Way? What does it mean to *become* through a relationship with *Thou*? Asking such questions I explore what it means to be a democratic citizen in terms of the self, the psyche, and the soul. Building from John Dewey, Martin Buber, Alice Miller, Toni Morrison, and Thomas F. Green, I argue a consciousness of the Sacred and I/Thou is imperative to democratic self formation and that without it we are susceptible to performing undemocratic actions of exploiting, manipulating, objectifying others for our own benefit. I propose that service-learning, when done well, can promote students' democratic conscience. A story about Joey, a fifth grade student who participated in a service-learning tree planting project, grounds this inquiry in practice.

### THE BULLFROG THAT BECAME A PRINCE

Wearing oversized rubber boots and clutching empty containers, twenty-six Native American fifth graders led by Mrs. Willis tromped through the sticky mud out to the swampland with the mission of collecting water samples. The field trip was a service-learning project that aimed to plant "a forest" in the valley near the school. This service goal grew out of a discussion with a guest speaker in which students learned about the relationship between deforestation and valley flooding. The speaker, a tree expert from a local college, informed the students that fir trees can drink ten gallons of water per day for every foot of height, leading them to imagine how planting trees could reduce flooding. The tree specialist counseled the students to test the water in the area where they intended to plant trees because to grow a "forest," clean, uncontaminated ground water is needed.

When students reached the swamp known as “Lake Joseph” they surrounded the pond; standing bent over they proceeded to bob their containers in the water. Mrs. Willis admired her fifth graders. Seeing all her students bent over and looking deeply into the pond with their rears facing the spring sky made her grin until a startling scream from the other side of the “lake” interrupted the glowing moment. “Hey, I caught a frog,” Joey shouted. Yelling and laughing, several students gathered around Joey who grabbed from the bucket a plump, bumpy, slimy bullfrog. “Eeww. How gross!” screamed one of the boys. Mrs. Willis darted over to the group to intervene, but the contorted faces of several students indicated she was too late. Joey mutilated the frog, tearing off its limbs.

Mrs. Willis saw Joey’s action as an act of violence against the environment as well as the classroom community. Joey’s conduct sickened and angered his classmates. “What did you have to kill it for, you idiot,” yelled one. “You’re a murderer,” another hollered. None of these negative reactions phased Joey. “I don’t care,” Joey remarked defensively, wiping his hands on his pants. “It’s just a stupid frog.” Teaching her students to care is Mrs. Willis’s primary mission as a classroom teacher. “If students care, they will be able to learn,” she often said. Rather than punish Joey, Mrs. Willis wanted him to think about his action and see how it was wrong. She decided to journey away from her planned curriculum to allow the frog murder to become the centerpiece for student learning over the next several days.

Mrs. Willis turned her classroom into a courtroom with half the class representing Joey and the other representing the bullfrog. Students wrote articles about the trial for a class newspaper, which they published and circulated throughout the intermediate grades. They created and displayed posters in the school on environmental violence. They diverged from the planned science lessons to learn about the frog life cycle and the role frogs play in the environment. The class returned to “Lake Joseph” where they continued collecting water samples. This time the students discovered pollywogs swimming in their samples and asked to keep some to watch them grow. Mrs. Willis agreed but required the students to examine the swamp so they could create an aquarium habitat in the classroom with all the necessary elements to sustain a healthy pollywog population.

Once the students constructed the pollywog habitat they began recording daily changes in pollywog growth. One student in particular became intensely observant. Every morning the student ran into the classroom over to the aquarium to stare into the tank of water, watching the pollywogs’ jerky movements. That student was Joey, the frog murderer. Mrs. Willis encouraged Joey’s attentiveness to the critters. When it finally appeared that one of the pollywogs was about to sprout arms, Mrs. Willis excused Joey from a spelling lesson so he could keep vigil. The glee with which Joey interrupted the class when a pollywog hatched its arms represented for Mrs. Willis a sign of positive growth.

After the pollywogs grew into frogs the fifth graders sent ambassadors to kindergarten classrooms to show the baby frogs to the younger children. Mrs. Willis’s most enthusiastic ambassador was Joey. When she tells this story she says that it is a story about a frog that became a prince or a student who learned to care.

## SERVICE-LEARNING AS EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

The example above illustrates that service-learning is a form of experiential education. Service-learning provides students with opportunities to develop and apply newly acquired skills and knowledge by providing a service, creating a product, and/or teaching others, in an effort to solve a community problem. The teachers at Chief Joseph Elementary organized service activities around the theme of environmental stewardship after consulting tribal members who expressed concern that urban Native American youth were not learning the Native American way of living harmoniously with the Earth, which is central to cultural, spiritual, and language revitalization.

Service-learning meets Dewey's definition of progressive education, which he outlines in *Experience and Education*.<sup>2</sup> In the case described above, Mrs. Willis engaged her students in learning through experience in the real world — the wetland, rather than relying strictly on textbooks to convey subject matter and teach skills. She connected learning to something the students cared about — the planting of a forest in the valley. Mrs. Willis did not use a strict pattern of organization characteristic of traditional education (*EE*, 18). Instead, she adapted her lessons, using the real-life experience of the frog murder — again, something the children cared about — as a springboard to teach communication skills, science, and social studies. She made “the most of the opportunities of present life,” using her students' interest in pollywogs, for example, to teach content on habitats (*EE*, 20). She designed lessons progressively so students acquired skills and knowledge as a means of attaining ends — such as soil and water testing in order to plant trees, and a mock trial as a means of addressing violent behavior. Throughout the project Mrs. Willis attended to the attitudes and habits her students were forming to determine which promoted and which obstructed continued growth (*EE*, 38-39).

Dewey points out that “not all experiences are genuinely or equally educative” (*EE*, 25). Miseducative experiences interfere with the having of further experiences and narrow the field of future learning. Dewey identifies two principles to judge the educative quality of experience. The first principle, continuity of experience, is based on the understanding that every experience “lives on” and influences in some degree future experiences (*EE*, 37). The second principle states educative experiences involve interaction between the individual and his/her environment (*EE*, 42).

When done well, service-learning experiences meet the criteria of experience Dewey delineates. Mrs. Willis provides a good example. Her development of service-learning lessons provided for both continuity of experience, and interaction between students and their environment. For example, rather than ignore student outrage following the frog killing, she used it as an instrument to broaden students' experience within a mock trial which served as a pro-social forum for expressing anger and a meaningful context for learning about the American judicial system. Following the second trip to the wetlands when students discovered pollywogs, Mrs. Willis sustained student interest by allowing them to keep the critters for observation in the classroom. Again Mrs. Willis expanded their experience, giving them a purpose for learning about habitats and challenging them to apply that knowledge

to create a naturalized pollywog aquarium. Clearly, Mrs. Willis's decision to modify her lessons was not a "matter of planless improvisation" (*EE*, 28).

While it is helpful to our understanding of service-learning to compare it to experiential education and to examine service lessons using Dewey's criteria of educative experiences, the real significance of service-learning to democratic consciousness is not found in the experience. Rather it is discovered through the quality of relationships the service-learning activities foster. Certainly educative experiences will, as Dewey argues, arouse curiosity and strengthen a student's initiative, creating "desires and purposes to carry a person over dead places in the future" (*EE*, 38). However, having experiences does not necessarily contribute to the formation of a democratic self. Buber argues, "[I]n the act of experience *Thou* is far away."<sup>3</sup> This is because when we speak of experience we turn the world and others into objects to be experienced for our own benefit.

The objectification and subjugation of others is a danger of service-learning when practitioners emphasize service experiences while neglecting service relationships. Service-learning done poorly is done to others rather than with them. Done poorly it can actually become a form of "poisonous pedagogy" as described by Alice Miller in her extraordinary book, *For Your Own Good*.<sup>4</sup> Poisonous pedagogy as Miller describes it promotes charitable feelings based on duty and obedience rather than a genuine desire to serve. It fosters conceit and self-righteousness. It perpetuates the myth that the "above remains above and below below, and the one who is above cannot have others do good to him, counsel, comfort, or instruct him no matter how much he may be in need of this, for in this fixed constellation no reciprocity is possible — no matter how much love there is, there is not even a spark of what we call solidarity" (*FY*, 32-33).

In poisonous service-learning service recipients are rendered as passive, needy, and broken while the service providers are regarded as active, affluent, and fixers of broken others. In other words, service-learning done poorly ignores ways in which the "served" serve the servers. When done poorly, service-learning fails to develop mutual and equal relationships between the servers and the served, and instead cultivates relationships of inequality and domination, contributing to the formation of an undemocratic self.

The effects and dangers of objectifying others through *imaginative* experience is discussed in an analytical text by Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*.<sup>5</sup> This text strengthens the point that focusing on experience without attending to relationships and their dynamics can interfere with and even stunt the formation of a democratic consciousness.

*Playing in the Dark* investigates blackness in white American literature and explores ways in which "a nonwhite, African-like presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served" (*PD*, 6). Morrison digs into the canon of American literature and pulls out a variety of examples to illustrate how white American writers have objectified black American characters in order to establish differentness or otherness, and to partially construct the meaning of whiteness and the American self through such

otherness. She points out how the white literary imagination has rendered black characters as enslaved, repulsive, helpless, voiceless, history-less, damned, and a mistake in evolution, in order to identify whites as the exact opposite: free, desirable, licensed and powerful, vocal, historical, innocent, and a progressive fulfillment of destiny (*EE*, 52). Morrison's purpose for writing the essay is to make accessible the complex methods in which white authors have used blackness to explore their own fears and desires, and shore up an admirable self-image.

Connecting Morrison's work to a discussion about experiential learning and service-learning is important. Morrison asks, "What is the impact of racism on those whom perpetuate it?" (*EE*, 11). I ask, What is the impact of service-learning on those doing the serving as well as on those receiving the service? Are the servers perpetuating a system of "haves" and "have nots" in terms of needed skills, knowledge, and resources, or are the servers themselves being served by those whom they serve? Morrison asks, "What does racial ideology do to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters?" (*EE*, 12). I ask, What does learning by giving do to the mind, imagination, and behaviors of the givers? Are the givers aware of and open to the ways in which those whom they serve give to them? In essence, these questions are not about experiences as objects that people have. Rather they are about relationships that people create as subjects, and the nature of those created relationships.

Let us look again at the service-learning project in which Mrs. Willis's students participated to assess the quality of relationships formed between Mrs. Willis and her students and between the students and their environment, focusing on Joey's relationship with the frog.

#### SERVICE-LEARNING AS RELATIONAL EDUCATION: RETURNING TO THE SACRED WAY

The service-learning project Mrs. Willis guided is an example of genuine service-learning because it attends to mutual relationships. Let us first look at the relationship between Joey and the bullfrog, then move on to examine the relationship between Joey and his classmates, Joey and Mrs. Willis, and finally Joey and the pollywogs.

Joey's discovery of the bullfrog in his water sample initially delighted him but his thrill quickly turned into maliciousness. He tortured the frog by pulling off its limbs then showed no remorse when others reacted with horror. Mrs. Willis knew that Joey, who often picked fights with other children, once witnessed a gang-related shooting and frequently saw fights between his mother and her boyfriend, and between his uncles and other men. Joey's mother was drug and alcohol addicted. As a victim of child abuse and neglect herself, his mother seemed to transfer the pain from her past that she could not numb with drugs onto Joey, beating and demeaning him. One can imagine that Joey's relationship with his classmates and his cruel treatment of the bullfrog stem from "poisonous pedagogy."

Miller points out "those who persecute others are warding off knowledge of their own fate as victims" (*FY*, 197). Miller would argue Joey's cruelty against the frog represents a repetition of some form of mutilation he himself experienced. Not conscious of his own experiences as a victim and the feelings those experiences

aroused made it easy for Joey to commit such an act and difficult, if not impossible, for Joey to show regret after the violent episode (*FY*, 115). Miller explains that battered children often grow up to be adults who abuse their own offspring. Illuminating the cycle of violence, Miller states,

they beat, mistreat, and torture out of an inner compulsion to repeat their own history, and they are able to do this without the slightest feeling of sympathy for their victims because they have identified totally with the aggressive side of their psyche (*FY*, 115-16).

Joey's violence against the bullfrog divided him from his classmates who, prior to the violent event, stood as a united community around the pond, engaged in the shared task of collecting water samples. Joey broke away from the group when he discovered a bullfrog. After he mutilated the frog his classmates wanted to cast Joey, the bully, aside. Tending to both her students' horror and to the importance of not allowing his classmates to exile him from the group, Mrs. Willis suggested that the class conduct a mock trial. The tension caused by the violent incident divided the students, but they came together in the "courtroom" and later in the joint project of publishing a class newspaper.

The teacher-student relationship between Mrs. Willis and Joey seemed to support Joey's healing and character development because Mrs. Willis took him seriously. She did what Miller suggests is necessary to mitigate the effects of poisonous pedagogy. She did not condemn Joey for his violent acting out of his own experience as a victim, and did not attempt to mold him in her image. Instead, she "heard" what he was communicating and through her actions — questioning the violence without condemning the child — respected Joey and recognized his feelings (*FY*, 100). Instead of excluding Joey from the next visit to the wetland, she showed a "willingness to learn from his behavior" and created a free space for the battered child to find adequate expression (*FY*, 101). A wonderful example of this was when Mrs. Willis excused Joey from the spelling lesson so he could bear witness to the pollywog's transformation.

The most interesting part of the service-learning story shared above is the change that occurred within Joey that was manifested in his relationship with the pollywogs. Every morning before breakfast Joey ran into the classroom to check on the pollywogs. Peering into the aquarium he watched the pollywogs for long periods of time, looking for observable changes as they flitted around the brown water. With excitement he reported any growth to Mrs. Willis whom he asked for reassurance, "Are they really going to become frogs?" Then on a Monday morning after a long weekend, the magical event of transformation finally occurred. In Joey's presence the pollywog sprouted its arms.

Joey's relationship with the pollywogs was a relationship of communion. As the pollywogs longed to become frogs, Joey longed for the frogs to present themselves to him. Joey reached out to the critters with tense waiting and watching. The pollywogs responded by reaching out to Joey with newly formed arms. Neither dominated the other. Instead, each was his own subject, and respected in his own right. Joey showed this respect when he took the baby frog to the kindergartners to show them how to handle the small creatures carefully. Buber argues "communion

in education is just communion, it means being opened up and drawn in...without it nothing succeeds.”<sup>6</sup> The Ojibwe people may explain Joey’s transformation as an example of a child learning the Sacred Way.

#### SERVICE-LEARNING AS MORAL EDUCATION

Proponents and practitioners of service-learning testify that when done well, service-learning changes the school community and alters the way students see themselves and each other. Whether the service is planting trees, tutoring, or corresponding with elders at a senior center, the effect is that students begin imagining the possibilities. Students develop a consciousness of themselves and others as agents. They come to view themselves as connected to the larger community. They start to regard themselves as community members who can make a positive and meaningful difference in their schools, neighborhoods, the environment, and in the lives of others. If service-learning teaches the ethic of service and caring, does it constitute moral education? A response to this question necessitates an understanding of what is and is not moral education.

Green offers a definition of moral education that may be useful to our discussion. In *Voices: The Educational Formation of Conscience*, Green claims “moral education has to do with an acquired temper of the self” and the formation of conscience through the acquisition of norms that effectively govern behavior.<sup>7</sup> Norms are rules of conduct that prescribe how to act in particular settings rather than “the formulation of a modal pattern of behavior” (*EFC*, 33). He argues norms cannot be taught or chosen, or developed then applied, but rather they “come to possess us” (*EFC*, 44). The acquisition of norms occurs through human action and activities, and participation in social institutions (*EFC*, 48-9).

Green claims normation is “the central business of moral education” (*EFC*, 26). Normation or effective self-governance requires the development of a multi-voiced conscience. Conscience is “reflexive judgment about things that matter” and “speaks” to us in multiple voices: the conscience of craft; the conscience of membership; the voice of memory; and the conscience of imagination (*EFC*, 22). The voices of conscience do not come into existence in some developmental sequence, and do not speak to us separately. Rather, “we ought to think of these different voices as standing side by side” (*EFC*, 30). A mature conscience is actually one in which the voices quarrel and “are even cultivated, deepened and elaborated” through those quarrels (*EFC*, 30).

Green differentiates his conception of normation from compliance, obedience, and observance. Compliant behavior does not indicate the presence of a social norm because going along with a rule may be the most convenient thing to do. Obedient behavior is like compliance with the addition that authority influences the action. Observant behavior acknowledges the social norm but does not necessarily obey it as in the case of lying (*EFC*, 34-36). Normation, on the other hand, is connected to an “attitude of caring, that is, the attitude that rectitude matters” (*EFC*, 40). In other words, one must care whether or not and how one’s conduct is in accordance with social norms.

If we apply Green's conception of moral education to the description and example of service-learning provided above, we see service-learning can constitute moral education as defined by Green. Service-learning when done well contributes to perspective-taking and the development of a multivoiced conscience. In the above case, for example, the students had time to sort through the feelings and issues involved with the frog killing that occurred during the service-related activity. Mrs. Willis did not condemn Joey for his behavior, instead she provided time and opportunities to question it. In other words, she did not order Joey to care about the relationship he created with the frog, she provided opportunities for him to think about it and re-create it.

It seems that the voices Green identifies as necessary to the acquisition of norms were cultivated through the activities connected to the service project. The voice of craft, for example, was fostered perhaps as Mrs. Willis challenged students to create a pollywog habitat in the aquarium approximate to the pollywog's natural habitat. The voice of membership was present perhaps as the students worked together to carry out the service-learning activities. The voice of sacrifice, giving up violence to gain caring, seems inherent in the act of service. The voices of memory and imagination seemed cultivated by the students' desire to plant a "forest" in a valley that was once forested.

Green's explanation of moral education as the formation of conscience through norm acquisition may qualify service-learning as moral education, but it does not adequately explain the change in Joey's self-formation and behavior. Was Joey simply normed? The transformation that occurred with Joey as he stared into the aquarium into the eyes of the pollywogs might be lost on Green if he restricts himself to five voices of conscience. I suggest the evolution of Joey's self-governing behavior occurred through an encounter with an other that Buber refers to as "I/Thou." The ability to relate to others as Thou and the practice of doing so, I believe, is vital to the formation of a democratic self, to the ability to sojourn with strangers. Like Green's conception of moral education, the voice of Thou cannot be taught. Rather it is discovered and reveals itself through relationships. Buber explains "what teaches us the saying of the Thou is not the originative instinct but the instinct for communion."<sup>8</sup> The instinct for communion is "the longing for the world to become present to us as a person, which goes out to us as we to it, which chooses and recognizes us as we do it, which is confirmed in us as we in it."<sup>9</sup>

The democratic formation of conscience requires an internal unity and true connection with the outside world. The absence of unity results from "poisonous pedagogy" discussed by Miller and constitutes what the Ojibwe people refer to as straying from the Sacred Way. Democratic self-formation requires that schools "awaken in young people the courage to shoulder life again."<sup>10</sup> I suggest service-learning can awaken this courage by putting students face-to-face with Thou's Sacred Ways, including the possibility of forming a democratic self.

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1. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), 11.
  2. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1974). This book will be cited as *EE* for all subsequent references.
  3. Buber, *I and Thou*, 9.
  4. Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1990). This book will be cited as *FY* for all subsequent references.
  5. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992). This book will be cited as *PD* for all subsequent references.
  6. Martin Buber, "Education," in *Between Man and Man* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), 91.
  7. Thomas F. Green, *Voices: The Educational Formation of Conscience* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1999), 3, iii. This book will be cited as *V* for all subsequent references.
  8. Buber, "Education," 88.
  9. *Ibid.*
  10. *Ibid.*, 115.