

# Holding the Pieces: Pedagogy Beyond Disruptive Environmental Education

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## INTRODUCTION

In January 2016, one month after world leaders forged a new climate agreement in Paris, a group of scientists published evidence of the advent of the Anthropocene, a new epoch marked by unprecedented human perturbation of the earth's geological composition.<sup>1</sup> Scientists have considered the implications of a new epoch for almost three decades, as the evidence has mounted of climate change, mass extinction, and dramatic transformations to the chemical composition of the atmosphere.<sup>2</sup> No domain on earth has escaped the mark of human activity, from the accumulation of plastic polymers to the sedimentation of radioactive debris. We do not yet understand the cumulative consequences of this disruption – thus, the Anthropocene will bring much ecological uncertainty as nations deal with extreme weather, pollution, extinction, resource scarcity, and over-population.

If the Anthropocene spells cause for alarm, then environmental education should play a role in helping us recognize our collective impact. Not all forms of environmental education emphasize environmental calamities; however, because every person on the planet is affected by ecological changes, we will reckon with human impact and the tumult that follows. An environmental education that does not engage the difficult matter of human-induced harm is feeble indeed. However, the acknowledgement of human impact can be painful; the confrontation with the human propensity for destruction may demolish a child's nascent faith in human kind. In this article, I explore the traumas that can result from a disruptive experience in the context of environmental education, and the reactions that can feed detrimental complexes and distorted perceptions. Borrowing from Eamonn Callan's discussion of "moral distress," I explore the emotional challenges that accompany a heightened ethical aware-

ness. A disruptive educational experience has the potential to rend students' cultural and relational cords, the very sources of their personal well-being and moral agency. Prevailing moral narratives prove inadequate for students struggling against overwhelming ambiguity, which may in turn lead to misanthropy. I consider the affective and psychological price of what Chris McMillan calls "a pedagogy of the impossible," and how educators might address students' anxiety when cherished, reliable beliefs are dismantled. Healthy development of moral capacities requires not only commitment to a moral good, but also a suite of perspectives and skills to help us live joyously and compassionately in a flawed world. Without the latter, disruptive, critical pedagogy remains tenuous and incomplete. If environmental education can help instigate collective transformation, pedagogy needs to attend to the personal dimensions of disruption while nurturing a nascent ecological awareness in a world seemingly inimical to eco-centric ethics.

### THE EMOTIONAL ENVIRONMENTALIST

In May 2016, a video of six-year-old Henry Hall lamenting the plight of the planet went viral on the Internet. Through tears and sobs, Henry bemoans the plight of animals, the decimation of forests, and the unscrupulousness of litterers. With indignation, he vows to fight those who would bring the planet to ruin. Less than a month after his debut, Henry had his own Facebook page, which presents his message of environmental responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

Henry's grief stems from the rupture of a faith that believes the world trustworthy, and a disillusionment in the face of deleterious forces that threaten all that is good. Who among educators and environmentalists have not felt a similar heartbreak at the news of gratuitous violence laid upon species, the desolation of habitats, the contamination of crystal waters, the effacement of skies by industrial effluents? To recognize our collective impact on the planet is to confront our moral conscience — for if the extinction of species and the despoliation of landscapes evoke any regret, we inevitably wrestle the question of why human civilization necessitates so much destruction. Henry's

outpouring manifests a fundamental heartbreak that weeps for the wreckage that humanity leaves behind; environmental activism is often compelled by this very fidelity to the planet, and a sense of moral duty to redress an intolerable offence. Ecological anguish persists because, despite pertinacious and coordinated efforts on the part of many, exploitative global forces continue unabated. Thus, Henry's sentiments do not merely signal emotional pain at a moment of disillusionment, but rather the beginning of an abiding sorrow that will likely continue to occupy a place in his life.

Students in environmental education likely undergo a similar process. While moral outrage in response to a perceived injustice can be a healthy force that steers students toward activism and self-transformation, it can also induce emotional and psychological stresses beyond a student's ability to cope.

### MORAL DISTRESS

When educators present information about environmental degradation, students wade into a discourse of ecological ethics through an apparent breach in moral conduct on the part of human actors. Images of bleached corals and polluted rivers, for example, signify the plunder of wilderness. Outrage and despondency is a common reaction to perceived moral infractions. This reaction may be characterized as "moral distress," which Eamonn Callan defines as "a cluster of emotions that may attend our response to words or actions of others or our own that we see as morally repellent."<sup>4</sup> The experience of moral distress cannot be mere annoyance at the rude behavior of others, but rather a deep experience of pain, of disturbance to one's core moral principles. Such distress is inevitable to the process of moral development, for "a man [sic] who is supremely compassionate cannot view with impassivity the many blameworthy ways in which humans fail to be compassionate nor can he regard his own failures in that light."<sup>5</sup> To value the integrity and vitality of the biosphere, therefore, is to become susceptible to indignation and outrage.

The onset of moral distress destabilizes a student's established relationship to her world through critiques that impugn what was previously accepted

without question. Suddenly an ethical demand is placed upon the mundane, and one is left to ponder the ethical implications of the trivial. For example, prior to her understanding of the detrimental effects of plastic, a student may have deemed the indiscriminate use of disposable cutlery an unremarkable feature of modern life. However, having recognized the environmental impact of plastic, the student sees her society anew — the cafeteria becomes deplorable, and the neighborhood picnic odious. The servers and consumers who use disposable utensils are now rendered environmental offenders, when they were previously exempt from ethical scrutiny. Suddenly, a widely accepted practice is no longer acceptable. The student problematizes a pervasive norm as a consequence of her knowledge, but her society remains oblivious to the ethical import of its practices. The student is beset by a quandary: her new found moral bearings put her at odds with the prevailing establishment; yet her protest cannot easily gain traction because her world remains impervious to the ethical implications of its practice. That repugnant practices are undertaken out of ignorance does not absolve the offenders, since ignorance is the very heart of the offence. The student finds herself an outsider in the company of her society, left to seethe in frustration at a problem she is powerless to change.

Further, a student's commitment to an ethical ideal may exacerbate, rather than alleviate, her experience of moral distress. Suppose she takes a stand against the egregious impacts of industrial animal agriculture by adopting a vegan diet. While ethical priorities inform dietary choices that in turn engender moral agency, they can also heighten one's sensitivity to vice. A vegan who, despite the temptations of taste and convenience, remains steadfast in her commitment may find meat-eaters objectionable. Her effort in transforming her own life galvanizes her moral conviction, and she may deem deplorable the complacency she sees in others. Moral commitment, in this case, renders the vegan vulnerable to sanctimony, blind to the complex factors that figure in others' apparent moral failure. Further, the vegan has staked a position in a domain not yet fully recognized as holding ethical import by the wider public; she may wage battle in a war that others do not know is going on. For the vegan, the experience of moral distress comes not only from witnessing the moral failings of others,

but also from the frustration of others' failure to even recognize something as morally important.

If environmental educators aim to highlight human obligations to the planet and promote changes in values, priorities, behaviors, and habits among students, we should understand the repercussions of such educational efforts. In effect, we enjoin students to move against the grain of established society, making them feel less at home in a world they have taken for granted. In the process, we set them on a course of discomfort — and there is no guarantee that they will remain poised and buoyant as they take on the immense challenge of resisting and changing established culture. Might the taxing demands of moral distress lead them to give up their ethical convictions? Might indignation leave students alienated from the very society that needs their moral conscience and ethical sensitivity?

### EDUCATED AND ALONE

With regard to our moral development as a species, Thomas Berry argues: “although we have developed a moral teaching concerned with suicide, homicide, and genocide, we have developed no effective teachings concerned with biocide, the killing of the life systems of the Earth, or geocide, the killing of the Earth itself.”<sup>6</sup> Environmental educators try to cultivate precisely the type of moral capacity that promotes the likelihood of consanguineous relations with the planet, and they proceed on the guiding belief that environmental education changes both individual and society for the better. Such a faith in the intrinsic goodness of education recalls what R.S. Peters termed the “normative aspect” of education.<sup>7</sup> If the ecological crisis stems from a grave moral failing, then environmental education at least implicitly promises reform and redress.

There are reasons to doubt the normative aspects of education, however. The educational autobiography of Richard Rodriguez provides a poignant case in point. In his book, *A Hunger for Memory*, Rodriguez recalls the isolation he felt as a consequence of his education:

I yearned for a time when I had not been so alone. ... I

grew to hate the growing pages of my dissertation on genre and Renaissance literature. (In my mind I hear relatives laughing as they tried to make sense of its title.) I wanted something — I couldn't say what. I told myself I wanted a more passionate life. And a life less thoughtful. And above all, I wanted to be less alone.<sup>8</sup>

Rodriguez' account of isolation calls into question the abiding belief in the positive and transformative effects of education. For many, new forms of knowledge and understanding do not unequivocally constitute an "improvement" in one's faculties. Change, according to Bryan Warnick, "is almost never simply 'for the better.' It is always saturated with ambiguity."<sup>9</sup> For Rodriguez, knowledge and understanding separated him from the realms of meaning that nurtured him in early life, and altered his relationship to his own cultural heritage. To this end, we may say that Rodriguez "was educated, but was not changed for the better *overall* or in every way."<sup>10</sup>

If we admit that the outcomes of education are ambiguous, then there is the alarming likelihood that a disruptive educational experience will leave students estranged from the world they know, just as Rodriguez' education rent the cords to his cultural past. In environmental education, discussions about the detrimental impact of prevalent social practices may relegate students to a minority struggling against society at large. Disruption alters students' relationship with society by refiguring their sympathies, alliances, and sources of identity — a nascent criticality upsets former associations and forges new affinities. For many students, the immediate effect of critique starts with their closest relations, the primary bonds of socialization through which cultural norms are maintained. Education can fracture these bonds by casting a censorious light on the social practices that inhere relational exchange. What kind of rupture occurs, for example, for both the student and her family, when she no longer sees a turkey dinner as a celebratory feast, but as a ritualization of animal slaughter? Far more than learning the facts about the abuses of food production, the student inherits a series of dilemmas: she must weigh the demands of her ethical values against the vaunted traditions that lie at the heart of her familial and cultural

obligations; she must negotiate established expectations while upholding her ethical commitment to the larger good. Because she is attached to society via her circle of relations, the student's adherence to conviction affects her kin most immediately before she "impacts society." Such difficult negotiations may be part of moral development, but we can recognize that the estrangement one feels as a result of a disruptive educational experience can be emotionally and psychologically taxing; an ethical stance might come at relational costs that educators cannot easily anticipate within the walls of a classroom.

### LIMITS OF MORAL FRAMEWORKS

From a young age, children are exposed to stories, myths, and dramas that play upon binary forces of good and evil, light and darkness, benevolence and malevolence. The struggle between oppositional forces gives shape to a point of view that sets the very boundaries of moral inquiry, the contours of ethical possibility. Binary oppositions are conveyed through myths that ingrain our views on morality.<sup>11</sup> The archetypal structure of myths (including fables and popular childhood tales) entails the adventures of a protagonist whose efforts are applied against an opposition, in whom the forces of darkness are nefariously manifest. Such myths cast human characters in symbolic roles; they marshal solidarity with the good while directing ire toward pernicious evils. Thus, the struggle between the two forces furnish the contents of a child's moral imagination.

Ruled by the familiar framework of binaries, we continue to cast roles for opposing characters in an effort to define moral struggles. For many environmentalists, enemies might take the form of rapacious corporations, corrupt governments, unscrupulous autocrats, and warped ideologies. Such moral binaries are psychologically alluring; we feel our own weight and density in the struggle against that which threatens the good; we derive affirmation and purpose by pressing against a perceived abomination.

Although oppositional binaries hold sway over our moral imaginations, such an orientation fails to fully apprehend the root causes of ecological malaise.

A student who traces the causes of ecological decline will not stop to blame the depraved actions of a few, but rather ascribe the crisis to macro-structures. Those who live in modern, developed nations are implicated in processes, systems, institutions, and relations of exploitation; we cannot satisfactorily assign villainy to a discrete cast of characters, and impute crimes to a cabal. Moreover, denuded forests, polluted rivers, and razed landscapes do not protest their injury. Extinct species cannot speak their anguish from the other side of oblivion as a victim decries injustice in a moral drama. If the earth is violated by human cupidity, its silence seems to convey an indifference to its own suffering. A student may therefore be resigned to the impunity with which humans exploit the earth. Thus, our elemental narratives fail to capture the roots of the ecological crisis, and confound our guiding moral compass: the more we inquire into the causes of ecological decline, the more we find ourselves caught in a global system, at a loss as to how to find moral direction. Not only are we at a loss as to how to live and act ethically, we risk condemning human kind as an eco-cidal species poised to ruin its only home.

### MISANTHROPIC TEMPTATION

In her book *Eco-villages: Lessons for Sustainable Community*, Karen Litfin<sup>12</sup> recounts the story of an eight-year-old boy, who came home in tears after learning about the rapid extinction of species: “I wish humans would just die off and let the rest of the world survive,” the boy sobbed to his mother.<sup>13</sup> Reflecting on the boy’s outburst, Litfin asks, “Is there something irremediably wrong that makes humanity behave like a planetary plague?”<sup>14</sup>

Consternation and resentment towards the human species is a possible and common outcome of a growing ecological awareness. Litfin calls this the *misanthropic temptation*, whereby human beings are deemed inherently flawed, their moral status defiled by a propensity to spoil. The condemnation of humanity as a whole often arises when we are confronted with the scale of our ecological problems and the apparent powerlessness of individuals to affect significant change. Powerlessness and moral outrage combine to discount the



ontological value of the human species. Exasperation in the knowledge of human impact can have a corrosive effect on the well-being of the individual by heightening the likelihood of self-condemnation and the development of anti-social attitudes. Since the ecological crisis stems from collective human action, effective redress also calls on cooperation between committed citizens, activists, communities, and governments; such collaborations require precisely the kind of faith in social action that misanthropy ill affords.

Misanthropy can also introduce cognitive and emotional schisms that unravel the coherence of a learner's worldview. *Humanity, population, society, and civilization* are faceless abstractions. Their statistical and conceptual delineations do not easily evoke the affective, relational sensitivities that individuals often enjoy within their immediate social circles. While we may deplore the voracious appetite of consumer society and condemn the encroachment of populations on wild lands, we cannot easily square such condemnation with our ties to families and friends, who may also participate in patterns of consumerism. If human beings are indeed irremediably flawed, then what accounts for the caring support that one may have enjoyed within a nurturing community? How does one reconcile the desolation laid at the hands of the human collective and the kindness of altruistic people? Students must cope with the dissonance of these conflicting "truths" and must somehow search for guiding principles in a world of bewildering contradiction. To the extent that the students' previous faith in humanity is upset by the revelation of environmental harm, their willingness to invest energy and effort into ecological justice will be affected by what remains of their faith in human kind.

### PEDAGOGY OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

If environmental education is to stir our moral conscience with respect to ecological harm, it will call for a fundamental reformation of our moral fiber, a radical challenge to our worldview as well as a disruption to our identities. These changes in consciousness are painful: former beliefs are rendered suspect; all that was once stable is suddenly precarious. Yet, if the current modes of western civilization are unsustainable and ecologically pernicious, then the work

of disrupting and deconstructing egregious forms of culture must continue.

Michel Foucault once characterized his philosophical corpus as the practice of systematic doubt in relation to the manifold technologies of society, and thus an attempt to dismantle the certainties that hold sway over us:

my point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.<sup>15</sup>

The deconstruction of dominant modes of life pulls the rug from underneath us, as it were, and deprives us of our unqualified trust in given norms. A *hyper-pessimistic activism* is the condition of a freedom that resists captivity under the administration of culture and society. Its unrelenting questioning makes the very prospect of certainty uncertain because, according to this philosophical impetus, “the point of life lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living, which lies at the limit or the extreme.”<sup>16</sup>

If the transformation of consciousness is indeed the quest for the impossible, then pedagogy itself becomes the persistent act of subversion and subterfuge, elaborated by Chris McMillan in “Pedagogy of the Impossible.”<sup>17</sup> Drawing on the work of Žižek, McMillan argues that the learning subject is not a cluster of positive identifications, but rather an anxious void that one attempts to placate with symbolic and imaginary narratives of a coherent self. The trauma of the void compels the subject to adhere to stable narratives. However, no discourse can “solidify the self, and it is this incompleteness that produces the anxiety that causes the learner to seek more secure narrative terrain.”<sup>18</sup> The learner’s desire for discursive cohesion, and the solace of “trustworthy answers,” foreclose the possibility of transformation. Only through dislocation of identification and the collapse of discourse does the learner approach the subject within subjectivity. McMillan writes:

it is when these narratives that mediate our sense of reality can no longer effectively explain the dislocation caused by

confronting an impossibility that a subjective paradigm shift that “refines the very contours of what is possible” can potentially occur. The art of a “pedagogy of the impossible” is to prevent the foreclosure of this rupture.<sup>19</sup>

In this pedagogical formulation, teachers are charged with the task of holding open the moments of rupture in order to stoke the potential for transformation, thus initiating Foucault’s notion of the *hyper-pessimistic activism*.

McMillan presents a strong theoretical guide for a postmodern, critical pedagogy; but educators must now consider how the “pedagogy of the impossible” can play out in their classrooms, from kindergarten to post-secondary. While I stand with McMillan on the need for disruption and dislocation on the path to transformation, I submit that educators must also consider the psychological and emotional costs of such pedagogy. What assumptions do we make about the inner resources of the learner to withstand the rupture of their worlds, their sources of security, the basis of their identity? If not all students have the psychological and emotional resilience to embark on a journey towards the impossible, what harm do educators inflict by removing the ground beneath the students’ feet? Assailed by a disruptive educational experience, might a student be forced to erect defenses to protect a self on the brink of disintegration, making herself impervious to the new ethical demands that call to her? Such self-protective reactions run counter to the teacher’s aims, and attempts to disrupt dominant beliefs will have failed if students harden themselves against ethical implications that make their lives less comfortable.

### HOLDING THE PIECES

The likelihood of emotional angst and moral frustration calls on educators to attend to the inner dimensions of students’ learning experiences. Environmental education, then, remains incomplete if it highlights human impact without expanding our affective capacity to remain buoyant in the face of overwhelming challenge. The work of cultural change requires astute and resilient activists who have the capacity to hold both despair and faith in equal

measure. A rounded pedagogy will look unflinchingly at human impact, while at the same time cultivate a capacity for a compassionate joy that sustains activism.

Disruptive experience is therefore only the starting point of a broader dialogue; we can design courses that build in conversations and reflections in which distress and frustration become the very sources of learning and growth. A dialogic community, in which teachers and students share and listen to the unfolding effects of a disruptive education, can work toward the integration of emotional vitality and ethical commitment within a united educational project. Classroom conversations offer an emergent curriculum, giving rise to projects that inquire into the students' personal struggles with ecological awareness, helping them discover wholesome attitudes toward inextricable dilemmas. Pursuing activities that arise from this nurturing space can offer educative moments where potentially unhealthy views are examined before they become corrosive attitudes. A caring dialogic community also soothes the anguish of alienation by constructing a new sense of solidarity with others who undergo a similar process of development. Supportive sharing of moral distress can be a process through which a learning community develops a wisdom that moderates the friction between ethical ideals and practical realities.

This dialogical approach to environmental education is sensible if we recognize that the task of collective transformation rests not merely on the recognition of facts, but also on the maturation of our inner caliber, the cultivation of a steady poise apt to hold pain in a space of tenderness. Educational practices that enlist artistic expression, musical creativity, poetic reflection, and contemplative practices of gratitude and appreciation instantiate a holistic pedagogy that intentionally evokes positive affect to accompany the rending effects of disruption.<sup>20</sup> Introducing students to techniques of embodied awareness can also help them attend to inner turmoil. Teaching students to savor cool morning air, and open their sights to the sky, are a few of the ways in which we can return to our somatic presence, regaining a composure that draws strength from the earth itself. Such simple practices reconnect us to ineffable sources of inspiration; although they do not obviate the challenges at hand, they return us to equipoise and recompose our efforts in spite of the countless reasons that

militate against hope. Holistic practices do not resolve the tensions that spring from the recognition of our predicament, as if to rescue us from the pedagogy of the impossible; instead, they summon our many faculties so that we do not wither in the face of the impossible.

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3 "Henry the Emotional Environmentalist," 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbjabTS5kac>.

4 Eamonn Callan, "Virtue, Dialogue, and the Common School," *American Journal of Education* 104, no. 1 (1995): 1-33, 6-7.

5 Ibid., 8.

6 Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 2006).

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9 Bryan R. Warnick, "Ethics and Education Forty Years Later," *Educational Theory* 57, no. 1 (2007): 53-73, 60.

10 Ibid., 60.

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13 Liz Walker, *EcoVillage at Ithaca: Pioneering a Sustainable Culture* (Gabriola, BC: New Society Publishers, 2005), 1.

14 Litfin, *Ecovillages*, 153.

- 15 Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 340.
- 16 Gary Gutting, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 340.
- 17 Chris McMillan, "Pedagogy of the Impossible: Žižek in the Classroom," *Educational Theory* 65, no. 5 (2015): 545-562.
- 18 Ibid., 556.
- 19 Ibid., 559.
- 20 Joanna Macy, *World As Lover, World As Self: Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2007).