

Cultivating Childhood Friendships as an Educative Aim: Virginia Woolf's Non-Humanist, Humanist Challenge to Philosophers of Education¹

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INTRODUCTION

It is quite obvious to those of us around the nightly dinner table, that my six-year-old daughter measures her happiness from day-to-day by the amount of time spent with friends. She is seriously concerned with the complexity of friendship and its importance to the (her) good life. She is in good company; the concept of friendship has received a level of attention from philosophers of education, who resurrect it from its private domain, that suggests it is important to the field.²

In this essay on friendship, childhood, philosophy, and education, a close reading of Virginia's Woolf's text, *The Waves*, frames the argument that childhood friendships *in and of themselves* are both educative and an important educational aim. This thesis stands as a challenge to the over-arching narrative of friendship in philosophy and education. This narrative follows the classical definition of the "ideal" or "excellent" friendship, founded by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle as "expert" reminds us that virtuous friendship is rare; it is practiced between those who are good and alike, in virtue and wisdom, and the young are only concerned with pleasure and passion in their friend-making.³ Thus, the argument goes, childhood friendship is *at best* practice for the true friendships of adult wisdom.

Though this is the overall narrative, foundational philosophy and education texts, such as Nel Noddings' *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, open up other veins of exploration. While her suggestions for cultivating friendship and care in schools most closely align with the Aristotelian ideal, she also calls on students and teachers alike to explore friendships that are, in her terms, "incongruous," friendships made of those who do not fit.⁴ In particular, Nod-

dings suggests that the study of incongruous friendships in novels can be especially fruitful. I suggest, taking Noddings at her word, that not only should we mine novels for models of these friendships, but also that we should acknowledge the cultivation of childhood friendships themselves as educative in itself, without regard to their future, practical value. Founded within wild pleasure and fleeting temporality, these friendships include difference, fragmentation, and chaos. This is the friendship of childhood that challenges the confines of rational wisdom and the moral excellence necessary for Aristotle, or the humanist Cicero.⁵

Though we might turn to other resources for rich descriptions of these childhood friendships (and we should), Woolf's novels offer a way for us to re-imagine and consider this complicated human relationship. Her *The Waves* contains complex and rich descriptions of both adult and childhood friendships that offers to educators a unique glimpse at childhood's complexity. Though reading a novel seems an example of a very humanist response to the challenges of our age, this is a novel that plays with our assumptions about children's abilities to reason, to care, and to live ethical lives, challenging us to consider again just what it means to be human. Woolf weaves her readers between the lines where social, geopolitical history, and the individual details of a singular life meet.

Her work moves us beyond the traditions of the humanist canon. Edward Said writes that, in order to enact the possibility of humanism, "imagine paradoxically, as a non-humanist, humanist, someone given neither to piety nor to tiresome and inconsequential word-spinning."⁶ Humanism, when turned upon itself, can disclose and provide ways to think openly, not remaining within a closed history or traditional practice, enabling new ways to see and challenge the old worldview. In this age, as we experience the permeable boundaries between technology, self, animal, and earth, we need ways to understand imperfect, and unequal, relationships.⁷ Childhood friendships are an experience of such relationships. Exploring these friendships through feminist texts assists us in the inclusion of these friendships in practical and educative life.

CHILDHOOD FRIENDSHIP IN *THE WAVES*

At its heart *The Waves* is a story or “play-poem” about seven friends (Louis, Neville, Bernard, Susan, Jinny, Rhoda, and Percival) growing up just prior to and after World War I.⁸ It becomes apparent that the seven characters cannot make sense of the war’s effects on the world, particularly after Percival’s death in the war.⁹ Julia Briggs’ comment on the children of Woolf’s *The Waves*, reflects similarly on the children of *The Waves*:

These are the voices of the next generation, the children who, in a world of social justice, should inherit the earth. Though their upper-middle-class audience listens attentively – and we as readers mentally listen to the syllables as they are written on the page – they can make no more sense than we can of what they hear.¹⁰

As in our own age, these children must make meaning in a world where the terror of war and violence threatens to collapse all hope and meaning. The reader of *The Waves* must be vigilant, trying to search, as the children do in their attempt to see the world, for those things that one can make meaning with, for so much of human experience will not make any sense.¹¹ There is no way that any person, adult or child, can make sense of Percival dying in war, Rhoda’s suicide, or a man found dead among beautiful apple trees.¹² The children notice how they are both related to and disconnected from one another as friends, and speak often of parts of the world that are friendly and ones that are not. There is a world where to be a child is not to engage in carefree play, but to work on being.¹³

In what follows in this section, I outline three aspects of childhood friendship in Woolf’s novel: the experience of vulnerable difference between friends, the recognition of friendship within a fragmented self, and the challenge of public life to friendship.¹⁴

As Noddings writes, incongruous friends, like those of Huck and Jim in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, immediately expose the vulnerabilities both of friends and friendship within difference. Their unequal experiences and social standings threaten to dismantle any possibility of con-

nection. Woolf's children experience this often, trying to make sense, to play within these vulnerabilities, sometimes empowering one another, but more often exposing each other to risk and shame. One difference highlighted by Woolf is the way gender and sex differences expose vulnerabilities. Woolf is unafraid to show children as sexual and gendered beings and, as they interact with one another, they are persons who experience the world differently according to these identifications. During one scene, Louis attempts to hide from the other children in order to masturbate. Louis does not want to be seen; he wants to melt into the leaves and also his desires.¹⁵ It is to the world itself (Nature) that he wishes to be known, not others. And yet, what happens is that Jinny sees him. Queering their "normal" relationship, Woolf has placed Jinny (female) as the public eye to which Louis (male) must adhere. Louis blushes and Jinny kisses him, challenging rules and codes of gender and sex. As adults, Jinny's sexual desires will be unmet and Louis's body is a tool of the state, a body needed for war. As childhood friends, however, they can challenge, consider, and play within their identity differences, even while acknowledging the impossibility of their adult differences that threaten to expose them to the world. Jinny takes advantage of Louis in this moment and yet, in the next, she is supporting him in a caring embrace and they run off to play.

While constructed by social norms, the friends deconstruct and transform these differences, moving between selves. Woolf's seven characters never quite feel whole. Instead of seeing this as something experienced only in childhood, Woolf retains this fragmentation, throughout each character's adult life, showing that the fragmented or incomplete self of childhood is retained across a life and is part of what it means to be human. In the novel, Susan exemplifies this aspect of self-in-friendship most clearly. She loves her friends with only a part of her self. Because she always feels torn between a self that is bound to tradition versus a self that embraces the earth and its wildness, she is unable to tell Jinny what she thinks, unable to commit to love Louis, and unable to embrace those parts of her self that do not mother. Thus, as both child and adult, she is the friend that continually nurtures and mothers all, both the children and adults of the novel.¹⁶ However, her friendships do not soothe her; she remains

fragmented and angry. Neither the friendships of childhood nor adulthood lessen her anger. Even as she recovers aspects of the self, by connecting herself to the earth, to the seasons, and the fertile land (and her own fecundity), she is, however, increasingly unsatisfied with her “chosen” life.

Finally, and as Susan’s anger shows, these childhood friendships are always threatened by public life. Throughout the novel, all the characters are concerned with the disconnect between private life and the wider public life. Holding onto both self and others in a world that is increasingly public is quite the impossible task. Rhoda’s tragic suicide embodies this impossibility. Despite her friends, Rhoda cannot remain alive. She is not successful at either childhood or adulthood. As soon as Rhoda enters the schoolroom, exposed to the public world, she cannot speak. Louis solves her math problem and she breaks down. Unable to “fit” herself, even as a fragmented self, into society, and finding herself outside all the norms of place and time, she has no recourse after Percival’s death but to choose death herself.¹⁷

It may seem as if Woolf has graced her readers with a dreadful picture of childhood friendship, which, like Aristotle’s, tells us they are really are not virtuous; they admit too much pain, power plays, incongruity, and impossibility. Why then should we even try to cultivate childhood friendships? It is because these young friends, in their experience of difference, fragmentation, and impossibility also uncover, as children, the beauty and grace of ordinary human life? Childhood friendship is not preparation for adult life, but rather it is the ongoing human struggle to make sense of the experience of life’s complexity. Childhood friendships are the challenge of both being a self in the world and enacting a recovery of self and other moving through the world. The friends insert themselves into the world through language, through play, but mostly through friendship.¹⁸

CHILDHOOD FRIENDSHIP: RECOVERING COMMUNITY

Childhood friendships are experiences of making moments in a life meaningful. This is the small hope held by Woolf’s writing, that the connection between others may just be enough to stop society’s decline into violence and

misery.¹⁹ Insertion in the world is only possible with others. As Bernard notes, it is with his friends that he grasps the world: “Some people go to priests; others to poetry; I to my friends, I to my own heart ...”²⁰

Throughout Woolf’s work the power of connection and community ring incredibly strong.²¹ The narrative of the close friends lends meaning to the otherwise disembodied, un-sensed, and fragmented body that is Percival’s corpse, which haunts the novel. In childhood, making meaning in this impossibility is enacted. Two - almost identical - passages are key. In them, the actions are simply reversed. I begin with the latter, in which the six friends, as adults, have joined together to mourn Percival at a dinner:

“While we advance down this avenue,” said Louis, “I leaning slightly upon Jinny, Bernard arm-in-arm with Neville, and Susan with her hand in mine, it is difficult not to weep, calling ourselves little children, praying that God may keep us safe while we sleep. It is sweet to sing together, clasping hands; afraid of the dark, while Miss Curry plays the harmonium.”²²

As the passage continues, each character remarks that time has been frozen in their meeting. What has not been frozen is the pull for the friends to connect with one another. Within the moment, at dinner, the friends intuit that coming together - being together - is something extra-ordinary, a moment rare and important.²³ This connection is fragile. In a matter of instants, it will be severed by a sexual coupling within the group.

The passage is extraordinary once we recognize that it is a passage that has already been seen in the very first chapter, centered on the blossoming friendships of childhood. There, the actions were reversed:

“Now,” said Louis, “we all rise; we all stand up. Miss Curry spreads wide the black book on the harmonium. It is difficult not to weep as we sing, as we pray that God may keep us safe while we sleep, calling ourselves little children. When

we are sad and trembling with apprehension it is sweet to sing together, leaning slightly, I towards Susan, Susan toward Bernard, clasping hands, afraid of much, I of my accent, Rhoda of figures, yet resolute to conquer.”²⁴

Like the chorus of a song, the repetition of the passage of the friends holding each other makes the reader pay close attention to the lyrics in each passage.²⁵ The chorus indicates that friendship gives moral courage, the ability to resist. It is not simply pleasure that childhood friendships can give.

Woolf’s children come together as friends, not because it is easy or pleasurable (as Aristotle might tell us) but because in the moment of connection and insertion something else becomes possible. In a sense, we become friends, and we make friends again, as adults - good, just, and wise friends- because of our need to understand ourselves, to figure out our world, even as we realize that it cannot really be figured out. In Said’s words again, we might say that this is what it means to be truly heroic; striving to understand what it means to be human, to use aspects of our humanity that challenge our very humanness. The incompleteness of childhood (which we tend to blame on developmental gaps alone) is itself the experience of being human.

If we return to Noddings, we recognize in the incongruity of childhood friendships that we “remain vulnerable in all our moral relations”²⁶ When we ask children to make incongruous friendships between those of class, gender, race, able-bodied, and other socially constructed differences, we expose them (and ourselves) to each other’s vulnerabilities. Embracing this vulnerability and impossibility seems an educative endeavor worth cultivating with children. By playing with one another, weaving tales of self and other through fantasy and play, children create actual, meaningful, important friendships in their present.

CULTIVATING CHILDHOOD FRIENDSHIPS AS AN EDUCATIVE AIM

I have little doubt that the friendships of my two young daughters will change; some will end abruptly, others will slowly wither, new ones will pop

up as they move through their lives. But I also have little doubt that they are serious relationships and deserve the serious attention of those of us who parent, educate, and serve her and all the young children in our lives. Rather than being tempted to discount childhood friendships because of their fragility and fleeting temporality, they issue a challenge for us to rethink educative aims. In the midst of this strange geopolitical age, rife with terror and anxiety, where friendship is expressed in “likes” and 140 character bursts, we might take some time to think about how to cultivate friendships between, and with, children.

Childhood friendships are not harmonious or measured; they are full of passion, both hate and desire. It is often an experience of figuring out responses rather than enacting a measured response, moving between right and wrong in an instant. And children make friends that are non-human; stuffed bears and imaginary playmates fill their time. They are friends with parents, teachers, and peers, but also with dogs, ants, and infant siblings. Fragile to the passing of time, they are also robust, making room for difference, the unknown, and violence. One only needs spend a day with three six-year-old girls to see this in action.

Briefly, I now consider how to bring what is contained in the powerful, serious young friendships Woolf describes into an educative context. I concentrate on school sites, not because this is the only place where children make friends, but because it is in the public school setting where this aim seems most at risk from larger political and social pressures. The consequence of exploring and cultivating childhood friendships is recognition that childhood friendships are serious endeavors, intrinsically worth cultivating: not because this is where persons can practice being ethical, or learn to care (though these are vital), but because they allow us to see new possibilities of defining and enacting friendship across a life full of pleasure, play, and the not-quite-real.

The classroom environment should make spaces not only for making friends but also for inquiring into friendship. Educators can offer models of incongruent and incommensurable friendships. Using friendship to reteach and rethink content in our educational sites offers a way to ask moral and existential questions, which, as Noddings says, “might make a difference in

their own lives and those of humankind in general.”²⁷ Children in communities can think deeply about the fractious history between oppressed persons in the United States through the concept of friendship.²⁸ As one concrete example, the children’s book “Two Friends” is a work that explores the friendship between the seemingly impossible relationship of Susan B. Anthony and Fredrick Douglass, leaders of social justice movements completely at odds with one another. Children can read this book with friends and teachers to appreciate how friends are different and how friendship can be so very challenging, and to inquire into what it means to really work for social justice in a democracy with one another.

Making friends as children challenges us to continue to learn and go beyond our present and flawed human selves. Recess and the playground yard can be more than a mini-break from academic concerns. It can also be a time when children have freedom to interact with peers from different grades, peer groups, and social groups. Parents and teachers too must be allowed space and time to make friends with their students and each other. Activities such as buddy benches, mentoring practices between older and younger elementary students, and all school play days are important parts of school life.

Prioritizing friendship also calls for a recognition that practices of desegregation at both the local and the district level, must continue, enabling children to experience difference between friends in terms of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. And though it is possible that the friendships of childhood can flourish in the large, consolidated high school that is standard in American cities, we must caution against the trend to close neighborhood schools, particularly elementary schools. Finance must not be our only calculus of risk and benefit; these closures may have a greater human cost than we might realize.

Beyond the school, there must be a recognition of childhood friendship’s complexity. That is, arranged play-dates with adult supervision do not a childhood friendship make. Instead, like Louis and Jinny, children make friends between the spaces of complicated human selves. Children, like adults, need private areas, secret or sacred spaces, and time to cultivate friendship with one another.²⁹ So too must they practice the hurt and agony that comes

from loving someone, whether too much or too little. Adults cannot mitigate or scaffold this kind of impossible experience.

Like many educators teaching at today's collegiate institutions, I am wary of the hold that social media has on my young students and myself. I worry that too much of my day is swept up (or under) in the fast-paced, addictive, and highly scripted life that is the digitally social. There is evidence that this digital age is having a profound and disturbing effect on young children's developing brains. Teaching critical awareness of this technology seems a better response, however, than disallowing them to engage with it. For example, I think about how my students and my daughters tend to be fluid in forming friendships; they can hold multiple friendships that cross gender, sexual orientations, and cultural and class differences. These are lines that, even in my own fairly recent childhood, seemed less dynamic. We can look to the ways children and youth positively use social media to enact friendship for our own practices. They are native users and, as such, they have a wisdom that those of us who "learned" to forge digital selves might not yet understand. My youngest daughter plays with her grandmother over Skype, singing merrily without a thought to the distance that separates them. Her smile is as grand as it is when they physically hug.

I turn again to my six-year-old, who went to school the other day with a stuffed cat in her backpack because "she missed me yesterday and needs to see what I do every day." My daughter is friends with this cat in much the same way that I am friends with Woolf. As her words have been carried in my mind over the past term, I wanted Woolf to "see what I do every day," to look upon the children and students that I work with. If pressed, I am sure that both my daughter and I would tell you that neither stuffed cats nor words on a page are "real," but that this does not negate these friendships. We both also seem to know that cats and Woolf are vital to us moving well in this complicated world.

Childhood friendships are temporally brief, fragile, and filled with wild emotion, but they are an intrinsic good that we must not lose. Woolf and her children show us that cultivating friendship between those that do not fit and are not quite excellent is, in fact, a most moral and educative aim.

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- 1 Edward Said, "Presidential Address 1999: Humanism and Heroism," *PMLA* 115, no. 3 (2000): 285-291.
- 2 Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 97. See also Jane Martin, *The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- 3 Aristotle, "Nichomachean Ethics" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle Vol. 2*, ed. Johnathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
- 4 Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, 98.
- 5 Cicero, *De Amicitia*, Project Gutenberg, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/7491/pg7491-images.html>.
- 6 Said, "*Humanism and Heroism*," 290.
- 7 David Kennedy, *The Well of Being* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); David Kennedy, "The Child and Post-Modern Subjectivity," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 2 (2002):155-167; David Kennedy, "The Roots of Child Study: Philosophy, History, and Religion," *Teachers College Record* 102, no. 3 (2000): 513-548.
- 8 Eric Warner, *Virginia Woolf: The Waves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 108.
- 9 Warner, "*Virginia Woolf*." See also: Frank McConnell, "Death Among the Apple Tree, The Waves, and the World of Things," in *Virginia Woolf*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 53-65.
- 10 Julia Briggs, "The novels of the 1930's and the impact of history," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, eds. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 84; Julia Briggs, *Reading Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).
- 11 See also: Laura Marcus, "Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, eds. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 140-179; Lorraine Sim, *Virginia Woolf and the Patterns of Ordinary Experience* (Farham: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2010); David Sherman, "A Plot Unraveling into Ethics: Woolf, Levinas, and 'Time Passes,'" *Woolf Studies Annual* 13 (2007): 159-179; Nigel Nicholson and JoAnn Trautmann, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1975). Susan Dick, "Literary Realism in Mrs. Dalloway, To the Light-

house, Orlando and The Waves,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, eds. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 50-71; Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986).

12 Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931), 211, 288, 15, 24.

13 Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925). Woolf uses the rising and setting of the sun at the beginning of each chapter to metaphorically allude to the stages of the character's lives. The novel ends, as do all days and lives, in darkness.

14 Betty Sichel, “Education and Thought in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*,” *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1992* (Normal, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992), http://web.archive.org/web/20060504112443/http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/92_docs/92contents.html; Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, “Men and Women: Ball-in-Socket Story?,” *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1992* (Normal, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992), http://web.archive.org/web/20060504112443/http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/92_docs/92contents.html; Barbara Applebaum, “On Good Authority or is Feminist Authority an Oxymoron?,” *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1999*, ed. Randall Curren (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1999), <http://ojs.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/pes/issue/view/19>; Zelia Gregoriou, “Reading Phaedrus Like a Girl: Misfires and Rhizomes in Reading Performance,” *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1996* (Normal, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992), http://web.archive.org/web/20060504113243/http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/96_docs/96contents.html. Woolf's concern with childhood has not been well documented (in contrast to her writing on the place of “woman” within society, widely addressed in Woolf Studies as well as in the fields of philosophy and education). Betty Sichel and Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon connect the two, considering how readings of Woolf's major works support ways to rethink early childhood care, family life, and educative relationships.

15 Woolf, *The Waves*, 6.

16 Woolf, *The Waves*, 22.

17 Ibid.

18 Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World*, 65.

19 Woolf, *The Waves*, 29.

20 Ibid., 267.

21 Ibid., 73.

22 Ibid., 228-235.

23 Frank McConnell, "Death Among the Apple Tree, *The Waves*, and the World of Things," in *Virginia Woolf*, ed. Harold Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 59.

24 Woolf, *The Waves*, 26.

25 Elaine Hinnov, "From Fragment to Chorán community in the Late Work of Virginia Woolf," *Woolf Studies Annual*, 13, (2002): 1-23. Hinnov's thesis was influential in my reading of community in Woolf's *The Waves*.

26 Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, 101.

27 Ibid, 118.

28 Appleton Unitarian Universalist Church, Public Reading, Sunday Oct. 30, 2016.

29 Max van Manen, *Childhood's Secrets: Intimacy, Privacy, and the Self Reconsidered* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1996).