

The Live(d) Curriculum: Life Feeling Itself

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Abstract:

The article focuses on the concepts and meanings that emerge for the author as she experiences the death of her father. Presented in a series of vignettes, the author encounters and explores the ideas of *(in)visibility*, *last(ing) rituals*, and *life feeling itself*. In profound ways, the insight she gains from these events occasions new awareness and deeper understanding of the live(d) curriculum.

Keywords: (in)visible experience, abstraction, sensation, tensionality, multiplicity, last(ing) rituals, lived curriculum, life feeling itself

Return

Two decades ago, Ted Aoki (1996/2005) made the call for multiple meanings of the word, *curriculum*. In distinguishing the live(d) curriculum from the planned curriculum, Aoki conceptualized the landscape of live(d) curricula as a hybrid involving past, ongoing, and yet-to-be experiences. He described it as inherently *rhizomean* “not only to signify the multiplicity of curricula but also to recognize that textured web of connecting lines that, like rhizomean plants, shoot from here to there and everywhere” (Aoki, 1996/2005, p. 419). Drawing on French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987), Aoki asserted that:

Such a rhizomean landscape comes into being by recognizing and legitimating live(d) curricula that in the imaginary of the arboreal landscape [i.e., planned curricula] have been rendered invisible. If living on earth as humans, experiencing being and becoming, matters in education, it behooves us to transform the language of school life such that multiple meanings of the word *curriculum* can prevail. (1996/2005, p. 420)

It is in this landscape of live(d) curricula that I ask what other meanings might be included now, 20 years later. Drawing on recent experience, I expose live(d) curricula, mine and others, as *no-thing* that could be expected, imagined, or much less found, picked up, and written about. The experiences remain open, necessarily incomplete, and infinitely generative. Through a series of vignettes presented in chronological order, I highlight and consider particular events that surprised me, occasioned my contemplation, and ultimately informed the work that is this article. Here, ideas and meanings of *(in)visibility*, *last(ing) rituals*, and *life feeling itself* give rise to new awareness and further sense making of the live(d) curriculum.

Offering

水
滴
石
穿

I was first introduced to this Chinese proverb by my father when I was three years old. I was upset about something that had happened to me. Responding in his usual quiet manner, my father picked me up, sat me on his lap, and spoke to me in Cantonese. He intoned, “*Shuǐ dī shí chuān.*” Then, in English, he explained, “Jennifer, eventually the water will make its way through the stone.” The saying, usually translated as “dripping water penetrates the stone,” helped me to realize the importance of perseverance and over the years I have come to understand other more subtle meanings about it. I offer the proverb to the reader, inviting contemplation of it as well as the emergent ideas and meanings in this article.

Context: Now and Then

Today I am with my father. No longer a little girl, I am married and have a family of my own. My father is 89 years old and his life's spirit is quickly fading. This morning, the nurse called me to tell me that death is near. For the past months we have tried to make the hospital and now the care home feel more like his home. We play his favourite music, read books and newspaper articles to him, and surround him with belongings from his house where he has lived for nearly 80 years. After school and on weekends his grandchildren come to play cards and mill about the room. They climb up onto his bed to be near him and as they laugh and tell him stories, he smiles at them and they return these with gentle hugs.

Just the two of us, I hold my father's hand and talk about the longtime friend who visited him this afternoon. This friend, also a member of the Chinese community and a retired shopkeeper, remembers my father's family history in the early days before Duncan, British Columbia was a city.

My father is the third eldest of nine children. His mother, second-generation Chinese, was born in Victoria, BC in the late 1800s. His father emigrated from China when he was 17 years old. Not knowing any English and just one person in Canada, he paid the \$500 head tax and the cost to travel for several days in the bottom of a cargo ship. When he arrived in Victoria, he worked for his cousin as a chore boy. Two years later, he apprenticed with a tailor and eventually secured a job with a well-established tailor firm.

My father's parents met in Victoria and married in 1919. They moved to Nanaimo and opened their first tailor shop. The family lived upstairs and downstairs, his mother and father sold pants, vests, and suits. His father also travelled to remote areas in BC to take measurements and suit orders from the workers in the lumber and mining camps. In 1926, my father was born and given the name Lee Men, which means "helper of the people."

The family moved to China during the Great Depression with the hope of a better life, only to return to Canada in 1934, now with seven children. They settled in Duncan and lived in a vacant restaurant in Chinatown. My father's parents spent all of their savings to open a dry-cleaning business and a tailor shop. With everyone's help, the family made enough profit to buy a house. Business continued to thrive during World War II and the tailor shop expanded into the retail clothing store, Charlie Onn Company, named after my grandfather.

My father left Duncan to study commerce at the University of British Columbia and then returned to work in the store. He later married and had four children. With my mother, they took over the menswear business, renovated the store, and continued to run the store until they retired in 2008.

Tension and Light

I leave the care home and drive to my house to get some rest. No sooner are my children tucked into bed than my eldest son returns to the living room. In a quiet voice he asks, "Can I sit and talk with you?" He makes himself comfortable in the armchair next to me and begins a conversation about Gon Gon¹, telling me as he always does, that his grandfather is special. This time when I ask him why, he surprises me with an unexpected response. Leaning forward he says, "Oh Mommy, there are many things that make Gon Gon

special." He pauses and sinks back into the armchair. With a sigh and a smile, great warmth and certainty he says, "But really, it just feels so good to be his grandson."

While I anticipate the first part of his reply, "...there are many things that make Gon Gon special," because my son often mentions qualities of his grandfather that he loves, the second part catches me by surprise. It is this piece of the conversation that provokes my curiosity and preoccupies my thoughts for the rest of the evening. My son's concluding remark, "But really, it just feels so good to be Gon Gon's grandson," does not offer anything definite or specific. For example, what does "just," or "feels," or "so good" really mean? Why is this remark somehow more explanatory or truthful than the comment that precedes it? And, although the word "but" does not negate my son's previous statement, it does emphasize the first and the second part of the response as being in some way different from each other. The word, but, compels me to consider the two parts of the reply as well as the assumed relationship between them in a deeper way.

Intrigued, I am reminded of the refrain from Leonard Cohen's (1992) song, *The Anthem*:

There is a crack in everything.

That's how the light comes in.

Similarly, my son's reply represents a crack or fracture in the conversation—not because the conversation is broken—rather, it is changed. The response creates an opening for me to move into its tensionality (Aoki, 1991/2005), enabling the potential for insight. I wonder what new ideas and understandings are possible when I attend to this experience and others in this manner. Further, expanding on Aoki's (1996/2005) call, how might such ideas and meanings not only engender new ways to recognize and legitimize live(d) curricula, but also, occasion language that elucidates the emergence and multiplicity of live(d) curricula beyond school life; that is, in everyday life?

The Visible and the Invisible

The next day, I drive back to the care home to join my mother and siblings. We talk about the grandchildren and I make sure to tell my father how his grandson feels about him. Keeping the quandary to myself, I try to make sense of it. And as day turns to night and night turns to day again and again, an important realization surfaces as I look through the family photo album. In lifeⁱⁱ and more simply in photographs, there are certain events we can experience and make inferences based on what is seen or imagined. Also in life as in photographs, there are other phenomena that can only be experienced in ways beyond those that meet our eyes or imaginations. These experiences, inherently part of the live(d) curriculum, are difficult if not impossible to represent because they exist only as they come into being. They cannot be captured or fixed.

Returning to and making new sense of the tensionality in my son's response, I now understand it in a way that speaks to the dialectic nature of experiencing life—not only as seen but immanently as unseen or invisible. In the first part of my son's response, "There are many things that make Gon Gon special," suggests there are known objects or imaginable attributes that can be seen. For example, Gon Gon always *smiles*. In contrast, the second part of his response, "But really, it just feels so good to be his grandson," infers there is no-thing that exists outright and somehow he is absolutely certain what this feels like. In this case, feeling as live(d) experience cannot exist as *thing* but at the same time does not imply absence. Rather, nonexistence only means the impossibility to imagine or perceive experience as thing.

Artist Wassily Kandinsky (1926/1979) explains a tension between abstraction and sensation. He describes abstraction as that which can be made external, visible, logical, and easily understood. For example, *the blue colour* of this room exists as an abstraction or external phenomenon that can be identified and clearly re-presented by something else such as a crayon stroke on a piece of paper or as written text. In contrast, sensation or affect, which comes from the Latin word *impressionem*, meaning “pressing into,” is how invisible expressions of phenomena such as *the way the colour blue makes me feel* or in my son’s case, the way “it just feels so good to be Gon Gon’s grandson,” arise as “a pure force, an impression that Life, and Life only, is able to catch” (Zordan, 2013, p. 83). In fact, the colour blue as an abstraction is arguably first a live(d) experience that originates from sensation (e.g., Thompson, 1995). Abstraction and sensation then are not separate phenomena but immanently coincidental (Henry, 2009). Kandinsky’s theoretical studies of colour further legitimize the live(d) curriculum (Aoki, 1993), articulating the ways in which experiences live(d) as abstractions and sensations are revealed (in)visibly and (un)foreseen by life in life as life (Henry, 2009).

French philosopher Michel Henry develops Kandinsky’s conception of the affect, situating it within what he calls, *the Internal*. Henry’s assertions are compatible with Deleuze’s (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Deleuze & Parnet, 1987) conception of multiplicity and the manner in which Aoki (2000/2005) uses the concept to distinguish the live(d) curriculum. Henry (2009) elaborates on how the affect cannot be anything but invisible: To prove itself is to show itself, but in its own way and no longer that of the world....There is no *inner world*. The Internal is not the fold turned inward of a first Outside. In the Internal, there is no putting at a distance and no putting into a world—there is nothing external, because there is no exteriority in it. (p. 7)

In keeping with the impossibility of externalization, my son’s comment that “it just feels so good to be Gon Gon’s grandson” speaks to the affect and incites a sensibility that reaches deeper and in manners that cannot be named or observed through the objectification of a person’s qualities or achievements. Henry (2009) asserts that it is not because the affect lacks legitimacy, specificity, or even sophistication; rather, it “is the figurative language with which one seeks to express the affectivity” (p. 72) that possesses these characteristics and as such, leaves us wanting. “It” is invisible because it is right with us as “we are always and already in life” (Henry, 1999, p. 364). “It just” is. Un-imaginable. Invisible. Intangible. Irreducible. Indescribable. At the same time, “it just” has presence and originality that is undeniably apparent. There is preciseness about invisible experiences. We can sense what “it” is, even what “it” is kind of like, and definitely, what “it” is not! So natural, *so right here with us*, sensation as live(d) experience cannot be separated from life itself.

Further still, any experience that “just feels so...” is not pre-existent and therefore cannot be predetermined or be made to happen. At best, “just feels so...” as live(d) experience emerges from the immanence of no-thing. This meaning of the invisible as no-thing and as potential (im)possibility complements Aoki’s interpretation of Homi Bhabha’s (1990) third space “where all humans as artists creatively indwell” (Aoki, 1996/2005, p. 422).

In Aoki’s space, again, I make new meaning of my son’s response: More profound than distinguishing the visible or known traits of (a person’s) live(d) curricula is to experience and recognize the primacy of the invisible or affect in live(d) curricula as it comes into being, moment to moment, in life as life. In the next two vignettes, I portray the day-to-day work of my father as storeowner and explore how (his) immanently (in)visible experiences are uniquely and distinctly illuminated in life as life.

Shedding Light

If you ask my siblings or me to explain how a typical day in our family began or more specifically, to describe a typical day in my father's life, it might go something like this: Every morning our father appeared from his bedroom in a fine suit, perfectly ironed shirt, and a handsome tie he tied in a double Windsor knot. Our mother would call from the kitchen, "Ray, you better go now or else you will be late." Putting on a pair of shoes he polished on the weekend, our father walked downtown to 138 Station Street.

On time, he opened the front doors and headed to the bank of switches to turn on the lights. He then made his way across the store, unlocked the safe and took out the money for the cash register. As he put the bills and coins into the till, he looked around the store to make sure the merchandise was properly displayed. He always smiled as he greeted the customers and engaged in conversation while he took their measurements and helped them to find the clothes and other items they needed.

It was here at Charlie Onn's where you would find our father, six days a week, having lunch or supper in the back of the marking room and if he was lucky, enjoying an afternoon nap in the shoe department when there were no customers. Twice a day, in the morning and afternoon, he made his rounds about town. Although he was a quiet man, people seemed to recognize our father on the street and go out of their way to say hello to him. Every day he bought the newspaper from the corner store and chatted with the other merchants and those who he met as he made his way to one of the cafés. Sitting at the counter, he sipped coffee as he read the newspaper. He then set off to the bakery where he bought sausage rolls, apple turnovers, éclairs, or Danish pastries to share with the family and the employees when he got back to the store.

Sunday was the only day when Charlie Onn's was closed for business. If our father was not spending time with us, he would be at the store taking stock, writing orders, or finishing the ad for the local newspaper. As he walked home in time for dinner, he often stopped to look in the windows of the other menswear stores, later smiling and explaining to us that he was "just keeping an eye on the competition!"

Last(ing) Rituals

Day in and day out, year after year these routines turned rituals, were my father and he them (Heidegger, 1971). Even in retirement he walked to town every day to buy the newspaper. Of course, it would have been more convenient to have the paper delivered to his house, but in doing so, much would be lost. For my father, buying the newspaper at the corner store meant that he could continue to make his rounds about town, fall into conversation with old customers and friends, and find a bench to sit and watch the comings and goings of downtown. These ways of being as integral parts of my father's live(d) curriculum were his (un)conscious ways of *being at home* in the store and with his family, the community, and downtown Duncan. As habits of praxis, they were situated and living phenomena—uniquely, characteristically and necessarily my father's (Aoki, 1993; Henry, 2000; Merleau-Ponty & Lefort, 1968). Immanently and co-incidentally (in)visible, these rituals that began when my father was a young boy, evolved during the years he worked at Charlie Onn's, and endured into retirement, shed light on how:

Life is a self-movement which experiences itself and never stops experiencing itself in this very movement and this happens in such a way that nothing ever detaches itself from this self-experiencing movement...nothing slips out of this moving self-experience. (Henry, 1999, p. 352)

As for the other routines related to my father's work in the store, I assumed they ended when he retired. However, in the days preceding his death and in the very moments of my father's passing away, practices that I thought had ceased, once again returned.

I saw, on many occasions, my father reach for things I could not see. And as I watched, intrigued, his movements became inexplicably clear and familiar. Several times and always in a calm and fluid manner, my father folded, hung, and arranged items in the store—pants, suits, sport coats, ties, shirts, socks, and shoes. For years, I watched him do this before the next customers entered the store and at the end of each day to make sure the merchandise looked its best.

The second routine I saw only once and it occurred several days after the first. This time, my father sat up straight as he took coins and banknotes from the cash register. Working from right to left he slid the coins up and out of the till as he pressed them against the curved compartments of the drawer. He then flipped up the clips that held the banknotes in place and slid the bills out of the drawer, one stack at a time. I asked my father, "Are you taking money out of the cash register?" Smiling with his eyes, he answered, "Yes."

Naively, I assumed he was making change to give to a customer. What I did not notice at the time was that he had emptied all of the coins and bills from the cash register. My father was not making change, he was cashing up. He was collecting the money from the till to put away in the safe before he closed the store. This is what my father had done every day for as long as I can remember, for years before I was born, and years after I left Duncan. I presumed his actions to be memories of working in the store. Now, only upon further reflection, am I beginning to realize the profoundness of these moments.

More significant than the recall of past experiences, I believe my father performed these acts as part of his last rituals. Beautifully composed as pure expression, he carried these rituals out to make certain that life was in order before he left it. And in the final moments before my father passed away, my family witnessed the completion of these rituals. On Sunday evening following dinnertime, my mother, siblings, and I took our places next to him. It was only after each of us had a chance to speak to him and lovingly wish him farewell that my father passed away. His death, utterly exquisite, begs for recognition of the poetic ways that life feels and expresses itself.

The final vignette details an experience that took place shortly after my father's death. For me, still new meanings of the live(d) curriculum emerged as I discovered and considered other (in)visible manners in which life feels itself.

(In)visible Experiences in Remembering

In the weeks after my father passed away, a friend told me about an online tribute to him. Unaware of who the author was, I was touched to find out that the person was a former customer of my father's. The tribute opened with an image of the large black-and-white photograph that hangs in Artists' Alley near Station Street. The photograph, originally taken in 1951, is of my father in the store.



(Photographer unknown). *Raymond Lee Men Thom in 1951 at Charlie Onn Company*. Thom family album.

The customer (D. Stockford, personal communication, January 21, 2016) expressed condolences about my father's passing away and shared stories about growing up in Duncan and shopping at the store. He described his first trip to Charlie Onn's as a little boy, "being dragged away from the important task of tadpole catching" to go to town to shop for clothes with his mother. Once in the store, however, he wrote, "I was fascinated by the polite owner and his family who made a horrible experience almost fun." He also tells of his last trip to the store when he purchased an outfit and shoes for his wedding in Vietnam. The customer describes in good humour how he chose a dark suit even after my father "kindly advised" him that "the dark blue suit would be too hot there." "Sadly," the customer wrote, "I took the advice with a grain of salt and remembered his words as I melted to near death in the tropical sun."

Soon after the tribute was posted, over 200 people, mostly past customers of my father's, responded by reading and sharing their own stories that in all spanned more than 50 years of the store's history. Restricted by the brevity of text-based media, obvious care was taken with the words which people chose to tell their stories. My father's customers contextualized their experiences in temporal ways as "earliest memories," "growing up," "season after season," and "for many years." They detailed important events in their lives including weddings, "purchasing my first Harris Tweed sports jacket," buying a pair of "fancy dress shoes," and "opening my first charge account." The customers considered my father to be "one of the special people," "a friend," "someone who provided real service," and viewed his death as "an end of an era" as well as "a great loss to the whole community." In these ways, their stories speak to the deeper and (in)visible experiences they live(d) forth with him at the store. In contrast, when the customers' seemingly concise images of my father such as "wise," "exceptionally gentle and kind," "patient," "helpful," and "real trusting," are pulled from the stories evoked by their live(d) experiences, most if not all meaning is lost.

It is interesting to realize that the customers assumed, before posting their tribute, that each of their experiences was significant only to them. While I do not know any of these people personally, I am certain this assumption is not true. In fact, I know that their experiences mattered to my father and in turn impressed upon me. This is because my father told me many of these very stories when I was a child and even after I left home. In a similar way that my father shared Chinese proverbs with me, we often reflected on his experiences at the store. These events as live(d) curricula were not live(d) as singular(s) but recursively live(d) forth as multiplicity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Deleuze & Parnet, 1987).

Also compelling are the contrasting ways that the customers' stories, as tributes, might be conceived. In one sense, their stories can be taken as objects or *gifts* with which they paid their respects to my father. In a different manner, their tributes might be understood as life feeling itself (Henry, 1999); that is, how life reveals itself as a generative process in which life experiences itself in the act of remembering. The customers' stories are not the retrieval of collected experiences from the past but testimony to how (in)visibly we live these experiences forth, recursively re-remembering with others in life as life feels itself, always anew. Life in this way never detaches from itself precisely because "nothing slips out of this moving self-experience" (Henry, 1999, p. 352).

I am reminded again of the Chinese proverb at the beginning of this article. This time as I contemplate its meanings, I gain insight into how the proverb relates to my father's life, his death, and the understandings occasioned by these experiences. For me, the proverb illuminates the quiet integrity and gentle strength with which my father lived well, each day, with others.

Re-Turn

This article revisits and takes up the call made by Aoki (1996/2005) two decades ago for multiple meanings of the term, curriculum. Curiously, however, this was not in any way my curriculum-as-plan(ned). I realize only in hindsight and as an outcome of writing that the task of making new sense of curricula-as-live(d) is exactly what I am engaged in as I experience the recent death of my father.

When my son told me, "But really, it just feels so good to *be* Gon Gon's grandson," he articulated knowing as both no-thing and that which comes into being in and as life. As live(d) experience, this knowing is not an *afterthought about* being Gon Gon's grandson. Rather, "it" is immanent, unintentional, unconscious, and invisible sensation. Moreover, as revealed in the vignettes, ideas and meanings of (in)visibility, last(ing) rituals, and how life feels itself are not abstractions used to make sense of life or, more specifically, the live(d) curriculum. Ideas and meanings appear in life as (in)visible life.

This point is not trivial in the least. It stands in direct contradiction with traditional philosophical perspectives that assume thought as that which enables access to life. This article as live(d) experience re-turns Aoki's call by extending beyond school life, contemplating the ways that ideas and meanings arise in the everyday, and exploring why they can never be separated from life (Henry, 2000). Consequently, the point alone offers primacy, tensionality, and new significance to the live(d) curriculum that remains "replete with...multiplicity" (Aoki, 1996/2005, p. 419).

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Endnotes

ⁱ Gon Gon is Cantonese for (maternal) grandfather.

ⁱⁱ This article focuses on human life. That said, it is not meant to privilege humans or preclude life as infinitely more than human.