



Silence, Discipline and Student Bodies

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Abstract:

In this ecological poetic inquiry, I contemplate a curriculum of silence, discipline and student bodies. As I seek to work through and against the entrenched-knowings of school and schooling in these ecologically urgent times, I contemplate how children's bodies are disciplined, how the voices of nature are silenced, how dominance rears its head through the myths of competition, progress and human supremacy. The cluster of poems is a consideration of some of the ways in which bells, security screening systems, silent lunchrooms, dead-lines, and all of the so-called "practical necessities" of schools, serve to silence and marginalize the voices, beings and bodies implicated in the industrial-powerful places and ecologically barren times of education. I ask, what wild, young-old, creaking, sleeping voices, beings and bodies need to be considered in our curriculum encounters? In response to David Geoffrey Smith's (2014) call for educators to "reimagine new, wiser, human possibilities" (p. 1), I consider how educators may encounter ecological possibilities for a curriculum of living.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; hermeneutics; ecological pedagogy; discipline

Not-speaking may be part of a story,
even as the pauses in music are part of the music.
Sound need not break the silence.
It can be an expression of the silence.

(David Loy, 2010, p. 8)

I write poetry from a broken heart. I write this ecological poetic inquiry to broken-heartedly contemplate a curriculum of silence, discipline and student bodies (Butler-Kisber, 2005; 2010; Brady, 2009; Sameshima, Fidyk, James, & Leggo, 2017). Hans-Georg Gadamer (1992) reminds me over and over again, always in new yet familiar and heartbreaking ways, that “bureaucratized teaching and learning systems dominate the scene” (p. 59) I write this poetry because I am stifled by the “hegemony of logos” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo, 2009, p. 40), whose “hierarchy renders silent anything that is unknowable, felt, forgotten, or overlooked” (Armos, 2017, p. 162). I write poetry to expose the cracks in the dominant view of “the natural world [as] just a means to an end” (Jensen, 2016, p. 21). I write poetry because I cannot abide by the ways in which children, like nature and all other dominated ones, continue to be seen as, “thing[s] to be dissected, so [the human supremacists] can get tenure” (Jensen, 2016, p. 21).

I write poetry as a spiritual, embodied response to David Geoffrey Smith’s (2014) call for educators to “reimagine new, wiser, human possibilities” (p. 1). I write poetry because “nevertheless it is everyone’s task to find his free space. The task of our human life in general is to find free spaces and learn to move therein” (Gadamer, in Misgeld, 1992, p. 59). These poetic writings are offered as incomplete and hesitant crystallizations of experience (Richardson, 2000). I hope that they might refract some wiggly and stumbling-subversive beams of light through and amongst the entrenched-knowings of school and schooling in these ecologically urgent times, so that, perhaps, “we with the youth and they with us learn to discover the possibilities and thereby possible ways of shaping our lives” (Gadamer, in Misgeld, 1992, p. 59). This work of poetic inquiry seeks to discover those possibilities by “singing out in lyrical language like light that seeps into and through the cracks and gaps.” (Leggo, 2006, p. 86).

I write poetry to wonder about the meanings of children in our lives: as wild ones, as controlled ones, as romanticized, disciplined, coddled, silenced ones. I write poetry to contemplate how children’s bodies are disciplined, how the voices of nature are silenced, how dominance rears its head through the myths of competition, progress and human supremacy (Jensen, 2016). In this work of poetic inquiry, which “meanders and wanders, ruminates and cogitates, interrogates and invites” (Leggo, 2018, p. 73), I ask, what wild, young-old, creaking, sleeping voices, beings or bodies need to be considered in our curriculum encounters? I ask, how do bells, security screening systems, silent lunchrooms, dead-lines, and all of the increasingly “practical necessities” of schools, silence and marginalize the voices, beings and bodies implicated in the industrial-powerful places and ecologically barren times of education?

I write poetry to heal, for, “as the heart breaks open, there will be room for the world to heal” (Macy, 2007, p. 152). I write poetry to remain heart-mindful to what may burst forth in these wild, “whiling time[s]” (Jardine, 2013) and wondering, wandering places: these times and places of perceived chaos lingering in the dark corners of high school corridors; these times and places of walking crossways to life; these times and places of lingering in delicious childishness; these times and places of our foolish human strainings to hear the Earth’s patient pleas for our awakening; these times and places of loons and mamas fighting to feed their babies; these times and places of standing up in silence and anger for a curriculum for living.

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We must read and write,
witness and testify,
honor and hallow these markers.
If we is to survive the more permanent forms of slavery,
if we is to survive the fallout of imminent ecological Holocausts,
if we is to survive . . .
we must sift de Storytellers from the Sandmen
And tell dem stories for a new generation.

(Kahn, 2017, p. 142)

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I.

Overheard early last year in a busy rural high school:

I wonder . . . what if the bells stopped ringing?

Well, let me tell you, last month
the bells in our school did stop ringing
the PA system, too, went on the fritz

a technical glitch
the mass email explained
apologized:

We’re on it, we promise
gonna get you all up and running, pronto
don’t worry about a thing
high priority, school safety, order and organization
and all that jazz

We have very good, very clear and reasonable reasons for everything
you know

(Ok, I get it, sure, very clear and reasonable reasons, like what if we had a fire or an intruder or a lockdown or a bomb or an earthquake or a bear in the parking lot or if a student wasn't duly and publicly reprimanded that they would miss their field trip if they didn't bother to hand in their permission slip, I apologize for the interruption of this announcement inconvenience everyone but last chance, ok, now for real last chance you late kids, the bus is leaving!)

Again, we apologize for the interruption everyone.
Thank you and have a good day.

for all the same reasons
that I must keep my door locked and blinds
closed at all times, too
and march my students out onto the field, in alphabetical-ordered silence
eight times per year

#1 high priority work order

Very High Priority. Work. Order.

bumped up in the list
above the heat system
that doesn't always turn on in winter
every time the temperatures drop, I bring my space heater
two sweaters and a scarf for myself and some extra blankets from home to wrap
around my shivering young ones
well it's spring now anyway, and we survived
maybe it can wait until next winter
but it's high priority that we not check our own watches

(Ok, come on, you Luddite, let's get with the times. We don't have watches! We check our smartphones now. They have built-in alarms! We don't even need those stupid old bells because we have very new, very smart phones now.)

my students love it when their teachers trip up,
when we get caught in the act
they laughed at me when I would say, out of bad habit,
"The bell's going to ring so finish your work!"
"No it's not! Got ya!"

and so after two days I got in the habit of saying
"The bell's *not* going to ring so finish your work . . .
or not, it's up to you!"
snort, snicker, "Good one Ms. L., yaaaaah right . . ."
I started asking a student to be in charge of dismissing us

when the time was right
that took a little practice

you know, we don't like to admit it, but
teachers are sometimes late to class
when my children are sick
and my back up plan falls through
sometimes I just want the stupid old bell to ring too

sometimes the whole staff is called to an emergency meeting
when a colleague passes away from a sudden heart attack
and the students are told to ignore the bells
your 10-minute morning break has been extended
to 30, maybe 45 minutes just today
the students don't believe their good fortune, but they don't know what has happened
not yet
so much confusion,

Chaos!

the chaos of an entire student body wondering, wandering the halls
waiting to hear news
and also, some of your teachers are not coming back to class today
our breaking hearts beat in rhythm on this day
we each share the news with our students when we feel ready
when it's the right time

and yet
when students are late
they are sent to the office for the dreaded late slip
to be documented
stamped
checked in
checked out

they supplicate at the confessional
box office window altar
hoping that today's sins are sufficient
to warrant a get-out-of-jail-free ticket
and a checkmark in the "excused" box

And so I wonder . . .

What if the bells really stopped ringing?

A flood of "reply all" teacher emails:

Silence, Discipline and Human Bodies

Hi folks, I am afraid to put this out there, I am pretty sure I
won't get fired but it might look . . .
well, here goes . . .
I actually wish we had no bells

(oh god, she said it . . . here it comes . . .)

I disagree!
Why didn't they fix this last week!
We are lost to eternity!

What about order and punctuality?

What about some peace and quiet?

If the school bells don't ring,
students have a built-in excuse!

If the school bells don't ring,
there is no reason to come to class on time!

I don't think we are *ready* for life without bells!

What if students are . . . late?

But you know, some are late anyway

And what if we don't use up every
single
second
of class time

Life is lived even when the bells are broken

engaging our learners in
efficient
productive
and accountable
countable
work?

What if students are late for
their lives?

What if we stopped
counting time-on-task

What if the hallways and parking lots
flood with students at the end
of every day
three whole minutes before
the bells that didn't ring?

and enjoyed some precious
afternoon sunshine
on a clear day
in the first week of spring?

Panic!

Chaos!

Rebellion!

I get it. It's scary, I know
but seriously . . .
what if we lost track of time

what if I had time

to ask students how their weekend was

Must get to those Ministry reading assessments

how their sick grandmother was

That's not in their Individualized Program Plan

how their new puppy was

What's all this fluff?

how their team tryout was

If your grades slip, you're off the team, young man!

before

or even after

the bell *didn't* ring?

whenever the time was right
what if another teacher had to wait five minutes for my students

because we had a heated discussion to wrap up
and I didn't want them to leave, abandoned, in that disheveled, wound up state?

what if we went deeper into climate change
if we went deeper into the river
we went deeper into equilateral triangles
went deeper into listening circles
deeper into questions
into grieving
life

My sister once gave me a gift, a round,
wall-mounted sculpture
of the Greek goddess, Euphrosyne

(Ok, to be honest, I had never heard of her before, so I looked her up. She's pronounced "you froze a knee." Now I go around making excuses just to say her name out loud.)

Focus! How can I tick off your time-on-task?

the Greek goddess of good cheer
goddess of mirth
goddess of merriment
goddess of joy

what if, front and centre
we faced
wild hair flowing, Euphrosyne
framed by clusters of wicked grapes
what if we worshipped this goddess
in the place
of a clock face?

(Ok, yes, just in case you were wondering, and I am sure it bothered you just a little, you wanted to know what actually happened when the bells stopped ringing . . . Well, some students still missed field trips because they didn't hand in their permission forms on time. And yes, we did have a bear in our parking lot. Word spread like wildfire and everyone knew and their noses were all pressed up against the windows watching as it went back along its way before it was even formally announced. And my students still come to class late. Some students come late to class every single day. Just like before. But I no longer bothered sending them back to the office for late slips so that they can miss even more of our class.)

And so, I wonder

Still wasting whiling time-off-task

on this extra-curricular rumination?

what if the bells stopped ringing?

Oh dear.

You with the questions!

I thought we had
covered this one already . . .

Back to the task-at-hand please!

silence.

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Young people want to know if, under the cool and calm of efficient teaching and excellent time-on-task ratios, life itself has a chance, or whether the surface is all there is.

(David Geoffrey Smith, 1988, p. 27)

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II.

Overheard last year in the Sistine Chapel:

“SILENCE!” We float through the chapel, along with over one thousand other tourists, noses high in the air, eyes wide, necks craning, to properly soak in our allotted twenty minutes of Michelangelo’s divine splendour. And God’s too.

“NO TALKING!” In peak season, twenty-five thousand people flow through the Sistine Chapel each day. Each one of us breathes out the carbon dioxide that is so deadly to the frescoes, causing them to fade and decay before their time (“Full to Bursting”, 2015).

“NO PHOTOS!” The walls, lined with wooden benches, are crowded with people, resting their tired feet, sneaking illicit pictures of the Creation of Adam, muttering to each other, or silently worshipping their smartphones.

“NO STOPPING!” The pews have been removed to fit in more tourists, and getting from one end to the other through the undulating wall of sweaty, solid, swaying people is my claustrophobic nightmare. A frisson of panic, swallowed back down.

“NO BREATHING!” The guards don’t really say “no breathing!” but maybe that’s what they want to say. Or maybe, once a year on the morning of April 1st,

they roar it out, just once, for a tiny little joke. Just to see what people do.

"SILENCE!" The guards, posted at the front of the room, standing at attention at either end of the raised pulpit, roar out this admonition every minute or so. And I wonder if, sometimes, on a slow day, they sneak a peek at the ceiling too.

III.

Overheard child-memory on an alpine lake:

step in gingerly,
kids in front, mom in back
Push off, canoe ritual,
sit down tenderly,
praying to the mama loon

There she is!

shoe-black face turns, sizes us up
takes one look with her sharp red eye
disappears, diving hunger-deep for her prey

paddles dip in unison,
tiny spheres bubbling down the end of the blade
dripping into the radiating swirls, fading off behind us
as we slice towards the sweet spot
where the rainbow trout lurk, feeding
they don't always splash for their supper
sometimes all you see is a dimple on the surface of the lake

and then gone

Unhook the fly from the cork,
pull the line through the rod tip
ratcheting, rod swaying,
bending in a graceful back-bending arc

cast

line flips through the air

Throw, flick, throw, flick, pull, flick, throw

swish and repeat

leader droplets glistening in the afternoon sun

the perfect cast
lands silently at the centre of the dimpled, muted feeding frenzy

A hit!

Pull, back! Strip the line!
Keep 'er taut, mom, don't lose 'er!
Quiet kids! Sit down!
Easy now, mom! You got it! Yay!
Fresh rainbow for dinner!

She's a heavy one, fighting hard mom, biggest fish you ever caught!
Naw, don't dare to hope, maybe just a fighter
Still, a great catch
Reel 'er in now, where is she?
Pulling the line under the boat!
And up she comes . . .
The end of the line, the leader . . .
Get the net!

Ohhhh . . .

Red, glaring eye emerges, inches from the canoe
Six-foot wing span, flapping back, pulling for her life, her dinner!
Our dinner! Mom!
Stay calm, kids, stay low
She is one angry mama

Loon yanks!

Snaps the line, triumphant
Sinks back into the deep, grumbling at our nerve

let her take it, kids
she earned that one, I tell ya
we don't have much daylight left

tie on another fly

Throw, flick, throw, flick, pull, flick, throw

swish and repeat

IV.

Overheard in primary school lunchrooms across the country every day:

- "SILENCE!" You are here to eat! Not to socialize! Not to be nourished! Not to breathe, not to taste, not to rest, not to enjoy!
- "SILENCE!" Your squirmy bodies are mine for the next twenty minutes! Then you will all get out! They don't pay me enough to be in two places at once!
- "SILENCE!" No, you may not go to the bathroom! You should have done that in your precious fifteen minutes of morning recess! That's what you should have done!
- "SILENCE!" Keep still, keep quiet, keep obedient! You are here to eat!
- "SILENCE!" I don't care if you've been sitting and keeping still and keeping quiet all morning! I don't care if you do it all afternoon too! They don't pay me enough to care about that!
- "SILENCE!" The first one to talk will stand and face the wall for the rest of the lunch period!
- "SILENCE!" This is no time for fun and games! You are here to eat!
- "SILENCE!" Eat your lunches and be smart about it! I don't care if you're too agitated/bored/stressed/tearful/terrified to eat! Throw it in the garbage for all I care! They don't pay me enough to care about that!
- "SILENCE!" No backtalk! Take your logic/pleas/please elsewhere! I don't get paid to negotiate with whining kids! You know the rules!
- "SILENCE!" Only discipline! You are here to eat!
- "SILENCE!" You know the rules!

V.

Noticed one day a few years ago as I was walking with my children:

I wait in the scattered crowd of parents.

Waiting for my charges—
we are plus one today.
My neighbour is sick and her daughter
needs a walk home too.

Thank you, she said,
what would we do without good neighbours,
she wondered.

They barrel down the back steps
of the school.
Can we play on the swings? They ask.
No, I say.
We've got things to do today. Tomorrow, I say.
And I mean it.
Not one of those "maybe tomorrow",
wishy-washy, sing-songy promises.
A good parent never makes a promise
she doesn't fully intend to keep,
you know.

We pick up the dogs, waiting, haunches curled, ready
to bound off the end of their leashes, towing
me towards home.
I lean back
in counterbalance—here we go again.

Walking with children is a strange thing. There are
many things you can do when walking
with adults
that you can never
do with children.

Like this one thing: that is, walking in a straight line.

With children, you see, it's like this:
charging forward towards
the cross-walk, turn right
up the alley to retrieve the wayward five-year-old tracking
a lady bug as it undertakes
evasive maneuvers. Cross
the one Busy Street, as a cluster of squirmy bodies, holding
hands, then immediately all veer
off the path to walk
the handrail by the corner store
like a balance beam. I rush forward,
and back, to help
this one, then that one, every time she
wobbles, screaming
in fear,
two feet off the ground.

Kids jump off the handrail, moving along now.
Try to walk without
tripping over little
drifting, wayward bodies. You can't
look up at a street sign without
stumbling over a small child who suddenly decided to
check out a worm wriggling
on the sidewalk, or
perhaps to save an ant from becoming
embedded in the sole of your shoe. Notice
that the favourite teddy has launched
himself out of the backpack
during a random cartwheel turned
by the wearer. Walk quickly
and with purpose-
back to the fallen one. Quicker than we have ever walked
this street in our lives—actually—to the spot
where he lies facedown in a driveway.
Our furry, brown, plain teddy bear who was born
in a boy's body, but wants
to be a girl. So says the wearer
of the backpack.
Breathe deeply. We found him—pardon me—her,
and head
towards home
once again.

VI.

Overheard last month in a staffroom near here:

—Some of our students are missing way too many classes! They keep going on vacation!
Yes, an entire week of classes missed! Every semester!

—Family holidays, I heard—a long way to travel, you know, so they just take an
extra week off, just like that. We can't enforce our old attendance policy.
Something to do with human rights, the school district said.

—Well, this won't do, this won't do at all. They need to be held accountable for their
learning.

—Yes, their learning needs to be countable.

—No, I said hold them accountable. This year, it will be two or three, and next year the
habit will spread like wildfire, and next thing you know, we will be missing half our
students!

—What did you do?

—Well, I gave them an assignment they wouldn't soon forget. Oh yes I did, and it was a doozy. Took them to task, yes I did, you better believe it.

—Good for you! Maybe I will do that next time. I have been thinking about having a test at the end of each class, every single day. Worth lots of marks. Yes, I think I will do that. Maybe they will also do their homework if there is a test.

They don't notice me eavesdropping,
but if they did, they might ask,
what did *you* do to these unruly students?

They didn't ask, and I wouldn't tell them.

("SILENCE!")

But in case they ever did ask,
I wouldn't tell them what *I* said to those unruly students . . .

"Goodbye. We will miss you. Have a nice holiday."

VII.

Overheard at an anti-gun rally in Florida (CNN, 2018):

Fight for your lives

A name,

and a name,

another name,

 a friend,

 a stranger,

another unknown name . . .

 silence

The poetry of mass violence pouring down her face

confusion

 silence

we love you Emma

 silence

never again

silence

Six Minutes and Twenty Seconds

seventeen names . . .

silence

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I am proposing an [ecological] jail break” that would mean “breaking down the walls made by clocks, bells, rules, academic requirements, and a tired indoor pedagogy.

(David Orr, 2004, p. 52)

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