



Mystery— Whereof We Cannot Know, Yet Cannot Keep Silent

Holly Tsun Haggarty, Lakehead University

Douglas D. Karrow, Brock University

Sharon R. Harvey, Arizona State University

Abstract:

After the long labour of bringing a journal issue from idea to reality, an editorial gives the editors an opportunity to stand at the threshold and invite readers in. In this special issue, here's what you will find: eleven curriculum scholars, including the editors, wondering about "Mystery, World and Education", as they ask themselves: What is mystery? How have I experienced it? What ways of knowing, teaching and/or learning does mystery suggest? This issue asserts no joint position. Rather, it tells eight unique stories, emerging from what the scholars are concerned about as educators, how and what they have learned from opening to mystery, and how this relates to their aspirations for curriculum. However, out of the diversity, commonalities emerge that speak to the nature of mystery. The scholars begin their inquiries wondering about mystery in terms of knowledge, qua the unknown and unknowable. Thinking about the unknowable is related to experiences of indeterminacy and enigma—mystery is found both in liminal spaces and as liminal. Significantly, the scholars experience mystery in and through their relations with *more-thans*—other persons, more-than-humans (animals, animate beings, agented things), Spirit Beings, Being itself and the Divine. Mystery develops from an epistemological to an existential concern. Theorizing mystery entails explicating one's ontological (or metaphysical) beliefs. Come, tarry, experience what it is to dwell on, with and in mystery.

Keywords: mystery; existence; relationality; liminality; epistemology; ontology; silence

Mystère – Ce que nous ne saurions connaître, mais dont nous ne saurions nous taire

Résumé :

Après le long travail nécessaire pour faire passer un numéro de revue de la phase d'idéation à sa réalisation, l'éditorial offre aux rédacteurs l'occasion de se tenir sur le seuil et d'inviter les lecteurs. Dans ce numéro thématique, vous découvrirez onze chercheurs et chercheuses en curriculum, dont les rédacteurs, qui se posent des questions sur le thème « mystère, monde et éducation » : Qu'est-ce que le mystère ? Comment l'ai-je vécu ? Quels modes de connaissance, d'enseignement et/ou d'apprentissage le mystère suggère-t-il ? Ce numéro n'affirme aucune position commune. Il raconte plutôt huit histoires uniques, issus de leurs préoccupations en tant qu'éducateurs et éducatrices, de ce qu'ils ont appris en s'ouvrant au mystère, et de la manière dont cela nourrit leurs aspirations pour le curriculum. Toutefois, à travers cette diversité, des points communs émergent qui témoignent de la nature du mystère. Les chercheurs et chercheuses commencent leurs enquêtes en s'interrogeant sur le mystère en tant que connaissance, c'est-à-dire sur l'inconnu et de l'inconnaissable. Réfléchir à l'inconnaissable est lié aux expériences d'indétermination et d'énigme – le mystère se trouve aussi bien dans des espaces liminaires qu'en tant que la qualité liminaire elle-même. De manière significative, les chercheurs et chercheuses découvrent le mystère dans et à travers leurs relations avec « les plus-que » – y compris les autres personnes, les au-delà des humains (animaux, êtres animés, objets dotés d'agentivité), des Êtres Spirituels, l'Être lui-même et le Divin. Le mystère évolue alors d'une préoccupation épistémologique à une préoccupation existentielle. Théoriser le mystère implique d'explicitier ses croyances ontologiques (ou métaphysiques). Venez, séjournez, faites l'expérience de ce que c'est de demeurer sur, avec et dans le mystère.

Mots clés : mystère; existence; relationnalité; liminalité; épistémologie; ontologie; silence

What is Mystery?

A generous mirror for humans to encounter themselves . . . emmeshed with other lifeforms;

A pitch-dark warehouse where we walk around with flashlights, always illuminating small parts of the . . . Whole;

A border . . . where mediations between light and dark, silence and sound, saturation and desiccation . . . reside;

A fountainhead, ceaselessly overflowing into all things;

A perpetual presence . . . that [we] can turn towards or away from;

An opening or clearing . . . never rigid or permanent, but happening within a particular time and place;

Third spaces . . . lines of movement with their own zigzag tails . . . enabling a multiplicity of options;

Participating in the rituals of life (washing dishes, folding laundry . . . writing poetry, laying down tobacco, smudging . . . drumming, beading, painting, weaving);

Tarrying with things, a much different posture than imposing upon, or ordering;

A world . . . creatures crawling and scrambling . . . the fragile, desperate, lonely and strange . . . all . . . embracing . . .

What is mystery? Dare we say?

—Found poem collated from the articles in this issue¹

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922/2025) ended his remarkable *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with the even more remarkable statement: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (§7). It was a provocative statement: advising philosophers to contain their thinking only to that which could be evidenced by logical, empirical facts. Although his atomism could be very appealing to outcomes-oriented curricular theorists (see Liu, 2015), Wittgenstein did not follow his own advice. For it is obvious to any human, let alone any thinker, that our existential reality brings us much unknown, yet to fail to speak of it would be to ignore that very reality. Thus, in this issue, eleven scholars offer their insights emerging from their rigorous inquiries on the topic of mystery and its relations to curriculum.

This issue came about through the common interest in mystery of the three guest editors (Impresarios Holly, Doug and Sharon). We are three scholars working and studying in the domain of education, though for different institutions and in different countries. We recognized our mutual

¹ These excerpts present some of the authors’ imagistic associations regarding mystery, not their more formal definitions (and are taken from, respectively: MacDonald; Gardner & Mandoki; Karrow & Harvey; Tsun Haggarty; Podolski & Shields; MacDonald; Kalin & Peck; Elke; Harvey & Karrow; Podolski & Shields). Note that unless otherwise indicated, all author citations in this editorial come from their works in this issue.

interest through prior conference presentations. In putting together our call for proposals, we asked these questions (and more) of would-be inquirers:

- What is mystery? How do you define it, theorize it?
- How do you connect mystery to your understanding of knowledge, of being, of reality and of ethics? What are the tenets and sources of these understandings?
- What ways of knowing, teaching and/or learning does mystery suggest?²

We received a strong response, from a variety of perspectives. We accepted for further consideration articles that queried and grappled with mystery, rather than trying to deny or demystify it. Articles in this issue were developed over the course of two years consequent to feedback from and discussion with reviewers and editors. The result of this extensive effort is eight intrepid ventures into the nature of knowledge, of existence and of education. (And now the travelers have gathered, and we editors stand at the doorway, like barkers outside a meeting hall, inviting the passersby to come in and hear of their adventures.)

Significantly, no joint position is put forth through the articles in this issue. The articles emerge out of a diversity of backgrounds, interests and methodologies. They enunciate differing descriptions and concepts of mystery, as intimated in the epigraphic poem. Nonetheless, there are many intriguing connections and directions amongst the articles. To start, all the authors accede mystery as a fundamental unknowability—and they all prize mystery. All project their gleanings regarding mystery over and against a perceived exclusion of mystery in the contemporary Western curriculum, and over against a paradigm of knowledge that denies mystery. All the authors offer unique stories, emerging from what they are concerned about as educators, from how and what they have learned about mystery, and from how this relates to their aspirations for curriculum.

Let us introduce the articles.

Doug Karrow and Sharon Harvey offer a valuable orientation to the topic, as they respond to three foundational questions they pose themselves: “What is mystery?; Why disdain for mystery?; and How may receptivity to mystery inform curriculum theory?” In this initial work, they demonstrate their typology of senses of mystery. They note that particular senses of mystery have emerged from the prevailing metaphysics of an epoch. And they lament that the modern “metaphysics of presence” has led to a denial of mystery.

Holly Tsun Haggarty also turns to the history of Western thought. First, she parses the origins of truth qua certainty derived from “justified true belief”, the aim for which has so strongly influenced Western curricula. However, she also traces a paralleling history of the Western mystic tradition, which couples truth to metaphysical ultimates. She believes there is much wisdom to be gained from the mystic tradition, especially its use of contemplative practices to open the seeker to a revelation of existential meaning.

² For a complete list of proposed questions, look up the original call, posted in the announcement page of the [JCACS website](#).

Morgan Gardner and Judith Mandoki present the findings of their impressively thorough collaborative self-study inquiry. Although their inquiry emerges from their particular concerns (as professors decrying an educational climate driving instrumental reason), their findings are widely applicable. They both describe and demonstrate what it is to *dwell* not just “on” but “in” mystery.

Harvey and Karrow follow up their foundational article with another that asks how curriculum might recover from the dominating *calculative thinking* that has emerged from the prevailing metaphysics of presence, and which denies mystery. Drawing on Heidegger’s resummoning of mystery as a state of both disclosure and withdrawal (of knowledge, as of Being), as well as Heidegger’s notions of *Gelassenheit* (letting-be), poetizing and meditative thinking, they recommend a *pedagogy of awe*.

The article of Adam Podolski and Carmen Shields is unique in its sounding of both research questions and conceptualizations of mystery from their favoured methodologies of *currence* and narrative inquiry, respectively. The authors locate mystery in the opportunity to ongoingly reflect on relationships and life experiences and, in doing so, to reassess their personal meanings, demonstrations of which they carry out in the work’s narrations.

Jennifer MacDonald engagingly narrates her singular concern: to shift outdoor education from a focus on mastery (of skills, of nature, or of self) to an experience of place as a living, sacred ecology. She explicates this learning experience as coming *with* and *as* mystery, which she elaborates as *aliveness*.

Nadine Kalin and Scott Peck’s challenging and fascinating article stands apart in its predication of a distinct ontology, that of *agential realism* (expounded via posthumanism, new and neo-materialisms). Mystery is relayed not so much as epistemology as the “affective” flow between agents (e.g., between a work of art and a human). The authors’ experience in art conservation allows them to propose *death meditation* as a way to experience mystery in the impossible *lifedeath* of a work of art.

Ramona Elke invites her readers on a calming and inspiring narrative journey, a *métissage*, in which she braids together various teachings regarding mystery. Her goal is to consider how making and creating practices (such as beading or writing poetry) may offer experiences of the unknown, which are, at the same time, a source of medicine, of holistic healing. Healing, she says, because these small experiences of mystery connect to the Great Mystery, *Gizhe Manidoo*, and thus encourage living in a good way, in community.

There are eight distinct and intriguing journeys to be followed here, as the authors attempt to discern the phenomenon of mystery, and the value of mystery, in life, as in education. The articles take on differing research approaches, including hermeneutic, phenomenological, Indigenous, humanist and posthumanist methodologies. However, the differences do not set up exclusivities; rather, there is much synergy among the articles.

There are many thematic connections and shared insights amongst the articles, for example, that mystery comprises not only the unknown, but is a paradoxical state coupling the known and

unknown (Harvey & Karrow; Kalin & Peck; Tsun Haggarty). For all the authors, heeding mystery requires *openness*, or what Karrow and Harvey call “receptivity”, necessarily a shift from rational epistemic expectations. And this openness to mystery involves garnering attitudes such as wonder or humility. Opening to mystery may also involve intentional engagement of “a-rational practices” (Gardner & Mandoki), contemplative or meditative practices (Elke; Gardner & Mandoki; Harvey & Karrow; Kalin & Peck; Tsun Haggarty); poetizing or poetic practices (Elke; Gardner & Mandoki; Harvey & Karrow; Tsun Haggarty). It may involve ceremonies or rituals (Elke; Kalin & Peck; Tsun Haggarty); and it may lead or connect to spiritual dimensions (Elke; Gardner & Mandoki; Kalin & Peck; MacDonald; Tsun Haggarty).

Imbricated among the articles are several noteworthy commonalities, which propose fascinating suggestions as to the nature of mystery. Firstly, we note the exploration and explication of mystery through *relational* terms. This is most obvious in the cognate words used in explicating mystery, “relation”, “relational”, “relationship” and “relationality”, which recur throughout. In addition to these cognate words, all the authors use relational notions and metaphors in describing mystery. For example, Elke stresses the importance of wandering *together* in mystery and coming *together* in truth (*debwewin*). Podolski and Shields describe mystery as an “ongoing cycle of coming to ourselves”. The terms “connection”, “interconnection”, “union” or “Oneness” occur throughout, in reference to both source and destination of mystery (Gardner & Mandoki; Kalin & Peck; Karrow & Harvey; Tsun Haggarty). In contrast, Harvey and Karrow describe mystery as an interminable alternation of “disclosure and withdrawal”, of “revealing and concealing”. Note that *relation* is taken here as “an attribute denoting or concept expressing a connection, correspondence or contrast between different things” (Oxford University Press, 2024).

While all the authors engage relational language to describe mystery, this is not to say that their senses of *relationality* are equivalent (as Sharon noted). For many of the authors, namely Elke, Harvey, Kalin, Karrow, MacDonald and Peck, drawing on sources such as Abram (1997), Barad (2007) and Donald (2021), *relationality* refers to animist ecological notions of the relations between humans and more-than-humans. For Harvey, Kalin, Karrow and Peck, relationality also has to do with philosophical orientations of subject to object (cf. Braidotti, 2013 with Heidegger, 1954/1977). For Podolski and Shields, in alignment with their key sources (e.g., Pinar, 2012; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), relationality links to psychodynamic conceptions of self and other. And, for Elke, Gardner, Mandoki and Tsun Haggarty, relationality extends a theological or ontological explication of the connections between humanity and transcendent Reality, between an individual being and Being itself (cf. Grondin, 2012; Nuttall & McEvoy, 2019; Simpson, 2011).

Despite these varying relations, in all the articles in this issue, we see mystery portrayed as something ineluctably experienced in human relationships with other beings in our lives. These respected, revered, desired, significant (though sometimes silent) Others include persons, more-than-humans (animals, animate beings, agented things), Spirit Beings, Being itself and the Divine. In all these relationships, mystery confers the humility of not knowing, and with that humility comes a decentring of the autonomy (and potential arrogance) of the human subject.

In addition to terms, notions and metaphors of relationality, the authors also engage relational prepositions and prepositional phrases. Some of these have been noted already—*on, in, as, with*—others include *up, down, between* and *beyond*. A pattern builds if one counts and compares the usage, something Holly did and puzzled poetically over:

Relations and Functions

so hard to say I Am Who Am
for it depends if Who That Am
is
up or down or *on or in*
as or with or *within*
outside *alongside*
betwixt and *between*
beneath or yet *beyond*—
still and all
so much falls upon
relations—
prepositions put propositions

The prepositions and prepositional phrases have the effect of placing mystery, of conceiving of a location for this mystery that we are in relationship with. But what results is not some concrete, secure, defined, structured, boxed location, as would be the place of logic. Instead (as Doug realized) what the prepositions point to is a *liminal* place (Karrow, 2010). *Liminality* is a second characteristic of mystery that is put forth by all the authors in this issue.

The cultural concept of the “liminal”³ was first proffered by folklorist Arnold van Gennep in his 1909 work, *The Rites of Passage*, to refer to a transitional phase of life, in the movement between one status to another (such as child to adult). The notion was later broadened by anthropologist Victor Turner to include intermediary situations of place, time or subject (e.g., waiting after defending a thesis to receive the result). And it was subsequently applied by critical theorist Homi Bhabha to his notion of *third space* in reference to the indeterminate cultural position of minority groups. In all of these cases, “place” or “space” refers to an abstract, metaphorical or psychological condition, state or position, although it may also be incarnated in a physical location.

“Liminal” is the very term used to place mystery in two of the articles. Elke describes mystery as “abounding” in the liminal space between physical and spiritual worlds. Karrow recounts a “liminal space”, a literal place, a “sylvan fringe” between forest and field, where he encountered an unusual flower that set forth his sojourn into the play of concealment and revelation that is mystery for him. Without using the term “liminal”, other articles also use this notion in relation to mystery. Kalin and

³ Nicely summarized by Thomassen (2009).

Peck describe third spaces as “mysterious and generative middles” that contend the known with the unknowable. Tsun Haggarty appropriates the locution “cloud of unknowing” to refer to the indeterminate state of the contemplative waiting for a divine revelation, but also to the nature of the revelation itself. For, while liminality may be a place of ambiguity, where an individual is neither this nor that, in terms of mystery, the liminal is a condition or state wherein the paradoxical or the paralogical may co-exist. This is a place of “the enigma of the counterplay between presencing and absencing” (Karrow & Harvey, citing Caputo 1986, p. 83). In a liminal space, “a way to deal with paradox is to place the contraries or contradictions into dialectic tension and, instead of trying to solve the puzzle, to let it reverberate” (Tsun Haggarty).

However, etymologically, the word “liminal” derives from “limen”, meaning “a threshold” (Oxford University Press, 2014), and (as noted by van Gennep, 1909) the liminal, traditionally, is not a permanent place, but one from which one expects to emerge, transformed in maturity and wisdom. Likewise, most of the authors in this issue utter their hope of accessing transformative meaning from mystery: for example, realizing one’s destiny of *mino bimazhiwin* (living in a good way, Elke); or experiencing a peak sensation of aliveness (MacDonald); or uniting (eventually) with transcendent Oneness (Tsun Haggarty). Nonetheless, even if one expects the experience of liminality to be permanent, always indeterminate, the very attitude of humility (of letting the unknown, letting mystery, letting Being be), or the very experience of existential paradox, can be scintillatingly transformative.

The following poem (a philosophical thought-experiment of Holly) reflects on these characteristics of relationality and liminality in regard to mystery:

The (Philosopher as) Astronaut

floating in the dark and silent space
 void of the
orienting of gravity
 and yet she’s
thinking of her
wiggling toes
 as down and
unfurling mane
 as up

but where’s her centre
heartbeating her existence
?

she’s not sure
pointing at the planet
 the fleck
she’s still

calling home and
wondering if down there
so far away
beyond her sight

someone is
pointing back

A third characteristic of mystery that pervades the articles relates to the middle item in the title of this special issue, "Mystery, *World* and Curriculum". In almost all the articles, the authors begin by discussing the epistemological nature of mystery, acceding mystery as the unknown or unknowable. But all the authors iterate mystery as more than just an unknown or even unknowable fact or item or aspect of knowledge. Mystery is intricately connected to profound life experiences and concerns and worries. Such concerns bring them to ask the purpose of their existence. As such, they reach, not to answers, but to meaning—the meaning of life! The authors must have recourse to the ontological and metaphysical in order to speak of mystery.

Again, in their explications, the authors do not show synonymy; just as their sense of mystery varies, so do their understandings of being and reality. The ontologies range from the materialist to the transcendent (cf. Kalin & Peck with Tsun Haggarty; also see the typology of Karrow and Harvey). And yet, despite the varying ontological allegiances, there are structural commonalities. To start, all the inquiries show that how we understand mystery relates to how we believe ultimate reality to be. And all the articles show that openness to mystery requires an ontological belief predicated on existential more-thans, found liminally and with whom we are in relationship. This is a belief that impels ethical imperatives, begging respect and reverence in relationships. Significantly, for all the authors, this belief, this sense and experience of mystery is described as transformative. And I note that it is due to the transformative effect of mystery that many of the authors make their fulsome recommendations as to why a curriculum should, and how a curriculum might, accept and include mystery.

For all the authors of this issue, it has been a deeply challenging task to auscultate the meaning of mystery—and to try to speak lucidly about that which holds an inherent silence. We three editors (and impresarios) of this issue are grateful for the effort the contributing authors put into developing their work. We invite readers to take time to enrich their understanding of mystery with this issue and its articles. We hope that this special issue encourages more consideration of mystery, in being, and in education. And we make note of some directions for further inquiry. We note that this editorial has offered just a brief opening to the relationality and liminality of mystery, which could be explored much further. How do they connect to dwelling, tarrying, emptying, uniting, or the many other notions the authors have put forth to describe mystery? Another topic that could be addressed is the connection of silence to mystery: silence as receptivity to mystery, as openness and generativity; and as contrary to muteness, secrecy or denial of mystery. For all the authors are very adamantly unwilling to be mute about the greatness of existential mystery—whereof we cannot know, yet cannot keep silent.

We close with a final poem, again by Holly, which considers all the elements of the arc of this essay: mystery, existence, relationality, liminality, epistemology, ontology and silence. The title of the poem is silent, using parentheses as placeholders for mystery, or its incantations.

()

*Calling and calling and calling,
but still I do not know
where you are, where I should be
to find you.*

If you are neither here nor there, up nor down,
neither outside nor inside, in front nor behind;
if forgetting is beneath you and unknowing is above you;
if you are adrift, lost at the edge of betwixt and between—

Good!

You are exactly where you ought to be;
for this is the threshold of hallelujah, glory be,
om, amen, so may it be.

Just set yourself down, right where you are.

Sitting, standing, lying awake,
still your voice and lower your gaze,
or shut your eyes. . .

See? You breathe. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Without even trying. Breathe in. Breathe out.

That's it. Breathe with humble longing.

Just let be.

Let-be-longing.

References

- Abram, D. (1997). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. Vintage.
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University.
- Braidotti, R. (2013). *The posthuman*. Polity.
- Caputo, J. D. (1986). *The mystical element in Heidegger's thought*. Fordham University Press.
- Donald, D. (2021). We need a new story: Walking and the wâhkôhtowin imagination. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, 18(2), 53-63. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1916-4467.40492>
- Gennep, A., van. (1960). *The rites of passage* (M. B. Vizedom & G. L. Caffee, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (First published 1909)

- Grondin, J. (2012). *Introduction to metaphysics: From Parmenides to Levinas* (L. Soderstrom, Trans.). Columbia University Press. (Originally published 2004)
- Heidegger, M. (1977). The question concerning technology. In W. Lovitt (Ed.), *The question concerning technology and other essays* (pp. 3-35). Harper & Row. (Original work published 1954)
- Karrow, D. (2010). Ecophenomenology as ecosophical education: The liminality of swamps. *The Trumpeter*, 26(3), 91-110. <https://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/index.php/trumpet/article/view/1211>
- Liu, Q. (2015). *Outcomes-based education initiatives in Ontario postsecondary education: Case studies*. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. <https://heqco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/OBE-ENG.pdf>
- Nuttall, J., & McEvoy, J. G. (2019). Theological-relational pedagogy: Winnicott, Rahner, and the development of a theological perspective on relational pedagogy. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 52(5), 720-731. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1686180>
- Oxford University Press. (2014). Liminal. In *Oxford English dictionary*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4257820438>
- Oxford University Press. (2024). Relation. In *Oxford English dictionary*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2824106039>
- Simpson, L. B. (2011). *Dancing on our turtle's back: Stories of Nishnaabeg re-creation, resurgence, and a new emergence*. ARP (Arbeiter Ring Publishing) Books.
- Thomassen, B. (2009). The uses and meanings of liminality. *International Political Anthropology*, 2(1), 5-27. <https://www.politicalanthropology.org/2-uncategorised/134-ipa-journal-contents-2009-1>
- Tyler, R. (1949). *Basic principles of curriculum and design*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2025). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (K. C. Klement, Ed.; Side-by-side-by-side ed.). <http://people.umass.edu/klement/tlp/> (First published 1922)



The Cloud of Unknowing. Photo art courtesy of H. Tsun Haggarty.