



Meditations on Ethical Learning

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In this visual poem, I try to capture my inner dialogue over the course of a confronting and challenging class in public health ethics and human rights that I had the chance to take as a graduate student. I reflect on things said and unsaid, and share the thoughts, feelings, and questions that arose within me as I experienced the teaching and the discussion. The work shows how I relived, in my personal time, the moments spent with fellow classmates and teachers.

The piece seeks to depict the shape and symmetry (or lack thereof) of my journey over the time of the course and my struggle to reconcile notions of respect and power in the privileged space of an ethics classroom in the Global North and beyond. At times, I weave in the words of characters from my past who revisited me as I learnt about various ethical principles and as I grappled with the application of ethical reasoning to

today's public health issues.

I learnt along the voyage of this course, the importance of sitting with whatever arises without turning away. The journey unearthed traumatic memories I had yet to fully acknowledge. But somehow, from the awareness of this pain in its vulgar, messy, and ever-evolving form, emerged self-compassion, a desire to listen and connect, and a commitment to honest sharing.

I was inspired by Otto Scharmer's 'Theory U', by the idea of consciously letting go and welcoming anew, to allow for the manifestation of deeper truth.[1] I find myself now more interested in asking uncomfortable questions, both of myself and of others. How much are we willing to misunderstand? What are the limits of our compassion?

Reference

Scharmer O. The essentials of Theory U: Core principles and applications. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers; 2018 Mar 20.

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A safe space, perhaps?
Seeds of collective understanding sown.
Daring us to grow.
What an interesting class.
Are there really spaces in the world where rules are less important than kindness?

I recall her warning me sternly,
as I lay broken,
that I must always choose to be straight with myself.

'Choose a grade,' you say.
Please, can we choose our circumstances? Can we choose to forget?

Vulnerability
On whose terms?
You demand that I bare my soul to you so that you may look away.

Pack of wolves.
Rabid. Fanatic. Frothing at the mouth.
Hungry for vengeance.
Tear you down.
Tear you up.
Draw blood from your will.
Your armor is impenetrable.
You don't return.

Keep the peace. For whom?
Our world is polarized, yes. When do we choose to stand with the people and when do we stand with power?
Us versus them. You versus me. You versus yourself. I versus myself.
How does it feel to preach to the crippled?

Wise men, smiling. Looking beyond while looking at us.
"Wouldn't it have been better to cooperate?" you ask.
"There must be respect," you say. I hear you warning us to be conscious of our place, to know our limits.
Is subservience to my oppression the respect I can offer you?

"Your lunch smells."
I ate in bathroom stalls.
"Your voice is ugly."
I purged my song.
"You will smile and cooperate when asked to."
I gave up my protest.

~~I was raped.~~
He raped me.
Three bodies.
Two allegedly protecting the third.
The third.
He relieved himself on my innocence,
again and again and again.
Try to find satisfaction in the betrayal, I thought then.
Body limp. Heart stunned to failure.
Insatiable since.

I don't know.
I won't know.
I am not enough.
I don't see.
I won't see.
I am not me.

I only think of myself.
You think of others too.
I am obsessed with finding pleasure.
How can you help us find joy if you don't cultivate it within yourself?

I am a hypocrite.
Yes. How can you move towards fewer contradictions?
I judge.

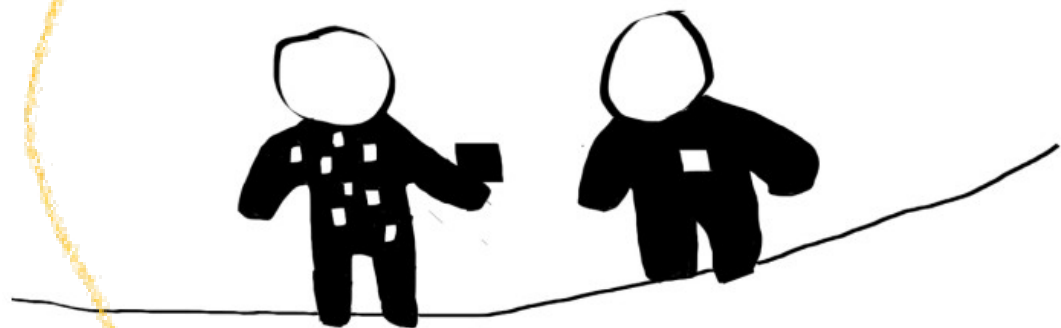
The mind is a monkey. Observe it with some distance. You are not your mind.

We are one.
We are one.
We are one.
We are one.

"Don't you see?" they ask.
Your liberation is inextricably tied to mine.

Teacher,
Your pain flows out of you as crystalline water from the spout of a majestic fountain.
Could you bear witness to the sewage of my past that dirties my present?
Did you truly miss those moments you now mourn or were moments missing?

Social Presencing Theater for an enlightened society.
"Make a true move," you say.
Your reflection is triggered by some but the 'Others' are unworthy of your consideration, unless of course, they play by your rules.
I can pretend to love you just as I pretend to love myself.
I don't believe I have ever experienced forgiveness because I am unable to forgive.
How about you?



Explosions
Hear ye, hear ye! Here we tolerate neatly packaged emotions only.
Do our words free us? Could they limit, hold hostage, make unreasonable demands? Could they deny us of our collective humanity?
Volcanic eruptions improve fertility of the soil.

Students convening on WhatsApp. Indeed, what is up? A union.

Solidarity.

Magma rising to eruption.

Did you know you can risk your life for noble ideals and wear blackface consciously?

Did you know you can subject a person to cruel ridicule behind their back and repackage your intention as friendly prodding when they are present?

But the powerless cannot be cunning.

Rule: you may defend as you please, but we dare not claim the same privilege.

“Doubt everything,” I hear my grandmother say.

Are we doomed to atomize until we all fade into oblivion?

“We welcome your critical feedback but emphasize respect.”

I arrived a stranger and part, estranged.

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