

## **A Pedagogy of Patience**

(Childhood is a journey, not a race.)

By now, among anthropologists, scholars of ancient culture, and some linguists, a fairly widespread awareness exists of significant differences between oral and literate cultures. It appears now that the academic celebration of the coming of writing as a huge advance requires at least a little modification in light of the larger perspective of the human journey that preceded literate culture. Of course, we do not have the whole story of that journey in all its particulars and are unlikely ever to have it, but considerable clarity seems to have emerged around a few aspects of the transition from orality to literacy.

We know that the alphabetic writing to which we are so accustomed in the West did not leap into existence. In fact, the first “writing” was an expression of sensory awareness as “pictures,” or pictographs. The trail from using an etched picture as visually obvious representation of something in the actual world, eventually to ideographs with less of the sensory immediacy but more of the “idea” construct, and thence, after a very long “eventually,” to the grand abstraction of alphabetic writing—all this required centuries and centuries of gradual change. The time and “stages” embodying this story are generally seen as a kind of cognitive, evolutionary advancement, a learning process that improved written communication from picture and particular to abstract and versatile, a story of intellectual achievement. But what if that is only part of the “picture,” more of a modern interpretation than a full account? What if those who lived in the various phases of this very long transitional journey would not recognize our version of their story, would not see themselves in it? What if the story of emergent alphabetic writing is not only about abstract containment but embodies an additional and altogether different theme?

The appropriateness of those questions may open to us through an additional query. What if some genius had come up with alphabetic writing before the other forms had emerged in their slow unfolding, and what if this linguistic Einstein had been granted the authority to impose the new form of communication on his or her culture immediately, within one generation? Alphabetic literacy would have been projected onto all official communications, but that would have required making alphabetic writing and reading the almost singular focus of learning. What would have been the social impact on an oral culture accustomed for thousands of years to the unmediated personal communication inherent in the kinesthetics of vocalization along with the sensory gestalt of body language perceived visually and in the nervous system, even on the skin? What would occur in such a culture if the abstraction of alphabetic writing were imposed in one generation? Would there be psychological and social effects? In point of fact, there is no need to speculate since we have already seen this scenario acted out and have unambiguous records of the results.

An oral indigenous society quickly immersed in reading and writing loses its bearings and life energy. This occurs in several aspects of a dismembering debilitation.

Oral peoples are sensorily intimate with their ecology to an extent few moderns can begin to imagine. One source of this intimacy is the unfettered integration of the human senses. It is difficult for us to appreciate, in a world where human ears are bombarded by demanding noises, that we were born with welcoming ears, receptive and waiting. In the Natural World, hearing is a living patience among non-human creatures, and among human groups living close to the Earth, hearing calls the other senses into a patient waiting, thus integrating them into participatory awareness of surrounding terrain and life. Oral peoples often experience the visual forms and colors, the feelings on the skin, the odors and sounds and tastes in the air, as communion with the living landscape, participation in its Intelligence. In this day-to-day, season-to-season immediate experience of participation, a person may hear Earth telling her stories—*hear* being this sensorial wholeness of encounter. In this way, Australian Aborigines encountered the Dreamtime in which significant features of the landscape were recognized as living participants in the Story *heard* by the ancestors and still participated in by the people walking the land today.

When oral people are summarily removed from their animate home with its spoken, living stories and aligned in classrooms to learn reading and writing, the experience is the culture shock equivalent of the ultimate earthquake. Once the stories are written on paper, they no longer require the body of the landscape, nor the body of the human, but take on an isolated and impoverished existence. They do not livingly carry the odor of the wet wind nor the feel of earth under bare feet, nor the visual pleasure of discerning hues of brown and gray in the fur of animals partially hidden among trees and landforms, nor the calls of critters and birds which, like the hearing human ear, reflect the integral intimacy of the ecological dance. Now the stories lie flat on the page; now the only direct visual work is to translate the abstract letter shapes into words, and the sound of the words cannot call upon the ears to invite the other senses into an unorchestrated dance of comfortable and unhurried intimacy within the greater story of Earth. Body knowing is lost; the bearings of the local human home are lost. The indigenous person feels *bodily* the deep loss of his world as a cosmic abandonment. The trees no longer speak, nor does the wind. The rocks no longer mark seats of wisdom and direction, no longer hold ancient treasures for the reverence of patience. Furry creatures cannot bring specific gifts of how life flows in the biome. The birds have withdrawn their warnings and revealings. The Story taken from the land leaves all in disarray, fragmented, nothing remaining but resources for human use.

In contrast to such a swift and irreverent imposition, the historic development of alphabetic writing unfolded through a series of stages followed by the slow, integral emergence of writing and reading into social structures through the gradually expanding education of children. The core wisdom here is that a lengthy evolutionary adaptation was necessary for the forming of a new ecology of communication *and* its ever-so-gradual absorption into the older ecology of communication. In dramatic contrast to that historical lesson, modern Western societies have acted foolishly with indigenous cultures and found that the abrupt insertion of abstraction into an oral society creates internal chaos and profound stresses resulting in meaning loss that contributes to alcoholism and loss of both family and social cohesion, etc. We have seen similar effects when severe economic depression rocks a modern culture, distorting “territorial” markers and dismembering basic societal structures, also resulting in excessive drinking and loss of family integrity. In these cases, both the individual adult psyche and collective social identity

become fragmented and disoriented, made fearful and desperate by such abrupt dislocation. What then of four-year-olds, five and six-year-olds, subjected to a similar assault on the order and wholeness of the developing psyche?

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The living context of learning to read and write is the internal ecology of the child and the child's Belonging to the Natural World. The Belonging to the Web of Life is far more basic and germane to a healthy psyche than the membership in society (when these are not the same). Change within the child-ecology must be adaptive, or it will be destructive. From both natural history and the long story of learning to write, we know that an adaptive process operates slowly compared to a non-adaptive process. It is critically important, then, that we recognize the need for a pedagogy of patience. This is consistent with all that has been written previously herein concerning education as a sacred work and the necessity for the teacher to see the child. Awareness (or lack of it) on the part of educational authorities determines the local context in which children shall learn. In our modern world, whether the learning experience will be contextualized as a great and fulfilling human journey within the larger Context of the Natural World from which we are inseparable, or as a desperate race to win recognition from others, is institutionally determined. Most of the time, the determining process occurs within the precincts of culture and all its insecurities around achievement, success, status and thus "locates" every child within the Great Loss--cultural separation from our Belonging and consequent loss of authentic identity. We move too quickly from orality to alpha-beta abstraction, failing to see how non-adaptive is our hurry even though multiple and statistically very significant aberrations among school children have been for decades signaling the pathology of our myopic focus on "progress." And it is not as though we lack abundant science to enlighten us.

At least since Maria Montessori, we began to see and have since deepened our understanding of child development and come to recognize the windows of growth. We know that children's learning flowers through definitive but overlapping phases in which there is a movement over several years from a profoundly sensory relationship with environment and continuing kinesthetic response as the learning venue, toward the emergence of capacity for abstraction and ideational interpretation of environment. As in the case of the slow historical journey from orality to alphabetic writing, this process in the child cannot be rushed without consequence. Although some children seem eager to read quite early, the origin of this eagerness is not always a precocious readiness-of-mind (recall our "genius" inventing alphabetic writing from nothing) but is often a coping response to social pressure. Some children *can* learn to read very early (a small indigenous oral culture *can* learn in one generation), but at what cost?

Within the living, multi-faceted ecology of a learning child, what are the effects of non-adaptive, culturally competitive hurry likely to be on emotional development, visual-spatial and kinesthetic refinement, social maturation, general sensory awareness (capacity for *presence*), and integration of the various intelligences and more subtle elements of our human-being? After nearly four decades in education, I could fill a book with stories of institutional violation of what

should be the slowly emergent journey into human learning. The number of emotionally and cognitively wounded or debilitated is greater by far than the number who ran as fast as they could and still came out whole. The upper echelons of our “civilization” are quite obviously populated by wounded and defensive egos driven to prove their worth and are so lacking in whole persons capable of giving from within themselves, capable of bringing gracious gifts. They appear so rarely that we annually award one of them a Nobel Peace Prize, as though such service should be exceptional.

The development of the capacity for healthy learning requires the journey of the whole body into the learning process, not just the head. Without the prior emergence of a developed, integrated body-knowing, the abstract capabilities of the brain lose their moorings and assume an authority that is unfounded and, as modern history dramatically demonstrates, tends toward fragmentation and inadvertent but horrible devastation. The collective soul of humankind in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has become (in spite of the digital age) a brittle parchment on which we have written our delusional intentions because our education has rendered us true believers in a future controlled by our brilliance. To think that pushing four-year-olds to “learn” the alphabet rather than play and engage the world in their learning bodies, and sitting five-year-olds at desks with worksheets so they can read before first grade instead of journeying healthily toward the body’s readiness for abstraction—to believe this is a service to our children and their humanness is one of the greatest delusions that perpetuates the belief in progress even as we continue to violate the Natural World and each other.

I thought, *I am here.*

But Father said, “You must persevere.”

I thought, *I prefer to wait and see.*

But Father said, “You must achieve the top.”

And so I began to do.

*I am here, I thought, still unseen.*

And teacher said, “You must master this.”

*I prefer to taste it, to savor for a while.*

And teacher said, “Knowledge is power.”

*Oh. I thought it was pleasure, like drinking water on a summer afternoon.*

But I mastered as told.

*I am here, I thought, even more hidden than before.*

My professor said, “You must cite your sources.”

*I am my source, I thought, or . . . I used to be.*

My professor said, “Learning qualifies you for great work.”

*I didn't realize they were separate. I thought learning **was** the great work.*

Nevertheless, I prepared for great work.

*I am here, I thought, with gifts to bring.*

But my boss said, “Work efficiently. Follow policy.”

*What is a policy that I should follow it?*

“It is what makes everything work,” she said.

*I hadn't noticed that everything was working.*

“Oh, it is,” the boss said. “Our bottom line is greater than ever.”

But I was weary by then and failed to follow policy.

*I am here, I thought, still unseen.*

Like those who did not do well on exams, though I did.

Like those who came from poverty and lowliness, though I did not.

Like those who chose their own path and were marginalized, though I was not.

And . . . I begin to see now . . . like the Earth—valued only as resources

for our grand projects, in which we see only the projects,

And I have been one of those projects.

Yes, from within the Dark where no one saw me, *I* now begin to see. . .

That if you cannot see me,  
And I cannot see you,  
And if neither of us can see our Home—then  
                  whatever we may claim,  
We see nothing at all.

In considering both academic learning and real Learning, the current focus on early literacy distorts and dismembers the learning process. Emphasis on early abstraction manufactures an artificial and disabling disconnect between the body, with all its natural learning capacity, and the conscious mind in its healthy “location” within the wholeness of the body’s Learning. Whereas the human body naturally resonates to the Greater Presence of the immediate Natural World, that resonance is likely to be blocked or at least attenuated by too-early stimulation of the capacity for abstraction. Early focus on conscious-purpose “learning” becomes an effective dismembering of mental wholeness as the brain is separated from its life within the body’s knowing and falsely aggrandized as the seat of learning and throne of control.

Reading introduced too early interferes with body knowing and distorts the inherently natural relationship of conscious mind to total embodied mind to Earthmind. The knowing and capacity for Learning living in the whole body is immediate to Earth’s long Learning (as we saw in the first interlude) and thus to our journey into humanness. We of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are unaware of how much our head-oriented acculturation, made central and dominating by the abstractions of reading and writing, has separated us not only from Earth but also from our own innate capacities for the learning of which the head is capable when operating within its proper body context. Our capacity for authentic understanding, for experiencing wisdom and knowledge as one, has been severely disabled by the impatient pedagogy that forces our children away from the knowing in their sensing bodies. We surely will not find our way into a healthy planetary future until we stop the imposition of abstraction upon children before their bodies have authentically located the conscious mind within bodymind and within the Earth-contained wholeness of knowing-as-being-known.