

## CARVED BY A PUMPKIN: MY ACADEMIC *CURRERE*

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The dusting of snow on the sidewalks was not enough to cancel school the day that I first became aware that my acts as a student would have real consequences. As usual, I rode to school with my mother shortly before she reported to work, just after eight. Mom drove slowly and was worried that we might be late for both school and work. For years my parents had relied on my grandparents to fill the childcare gap before I was school aged, so they hoped against everything that the winter storm would quietly pass and school would be in session.

Now that I was in Kindergarten, my parents made certain to deliver me to school as faithfully as the U.S. Mail. This fidelity was not out of an abundance of caution for my academic development; rather, it was a financial decision that my father claimed was forced on him. Whatever the reasons, my regular attendance did have an effect on my academic life. I received notice that Friday morning that there was to be a drawing amongst the students with perfect attendance throughout the month of October, the reward for which was to be a large pumpkin for the lucky student to take home for the Thanksgiving Holiday. A piece of paper with my name was pulled out of a prop top hat, and I felt like I was living the words from Lou Gehrig's speech about being the "luckiest man on the face of the earth." My outlook on school had just changed, and I understood that my destiny seemed to be the result of my intervention. From that day to the end of my senior year, I logged one missed day of school (to attend my grandfather's funeral). The lesson about good attendance and hard work was sold to me that day for the price of a pumpkin; I was instantly a lifelong customer. However, the path from my academic nascence to that of my graduating year was not without turmoil.

### INTELLIGENT TERROR AND DUMB LUCK

The presence of terror was all around; it was almost like the newspaper was taunting me to change my point of view and convince me that things happen to people without their control. Specifically, April 19, 1995, was one of those days that showed me that not everyone will get a chance at their own pumpkin, despite faithful attendance or hard work. The bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City took that chance out of the hands of 19 children whose parents had faithfully brought them to daycare. As a third grader, I remember my teacher struggling for words, but I knew that the casualty for me was my theory of controlling my own destiny. My development and belief in being the master of my own destiny was shattered, along with the dreams of 168 other souls.

Further terroristic events continued to weigh against my masterful illusion with judicial precision. The occurrences of terror began to whittle away at my illusory theory of control. Two events bookended my high school years: the April 20, 1999, Columbine attack and the September 11, 2001, World Trade Center/Pentagon attack. As a freshman, I watched with horror the nightmare, recorded on school security cameras, as Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris murdered teenagers in their hometown. Suddenly, my pre-calculus project did not seem to matter as much, since I convinced my 15-year-old self that I would not live to see calculus. I was certainly convinced that chance was much more in control than my direct intervention, but I kept plugging

away in school, shielded by adolescent indifference and geographic distance to the terror. The September 11 attacks happened when I was a high school senior; I was certain that making it out of undergraduate school alive was unlikely. As luck would have it, I managed to continue finding myself in my studies, and I became a reflective onlooker, instead of a collateral victim, to the events around the world.

It was toward the end of my undergraduate years that I realized that luck was not the only force at play. As I began to lead study sessions and tutorials for younger students, I began thinking of the tips and techniques that my teachers had used in their practices. Slowly, I realized that it was my teachers who were the constant in my physical world amidst the chaos and crises. It was the teachers who were strong enough to steady my path in the midst of the terror, and it was these professionals who clearly acted as the best models of what I was to become, even if I didn't know it then. If being a teacher could give both my past and future a reason for being, how could there be any other equally good destiny in my cards? I enjoyed helping others reach their academic goals, and I decided that, despite being a psychology major, I was going to be a teacher. Luck again was on my side as I applied to a post-bac certification program to follow the path of those who inspired me. I completed the program and got a job at the high school that I had attended a few years earlier.

#### **FROM DECENT STUDENT TO BAD TEACHER TO BECOMING THE OTHER**

My first year as a teacher, the problems were as numerous as the worksheets I gave to students. I was a bad teacher, unlike my Kindergarten teacher who had such a profound impact on me all those years ago. I wanted to be better, and I decided to go back to school to pursue an M.Ed. in secondary education. As fate would have it, my new wife was selected to go to France as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar the year after we got married, which would have been my second year of teaching. So, it was with a naïve heart that I asked my superintendent if he would “save” my job for me while I went gallivanting about Europe for a year. My selling point was that I would finish my graduate work online to return to the district as an asset and a more well-prepared educator. He was kind enough to grant my leave, and our new family sailed east.

Romantically, I would like to say that I spent that year in Nantes much like Fitzgerald in Paris, but it was not so. I could not speak the language; I could barely order a pizza and/or find the right bus to get back home. I did manage to follow the U.S. news, and I began to realize that, now, I was an outsider looking in on events with insider experience. As I continued my course work online, I watched the blotter with a new perspective as an outsider; I was the “Other” now. For the first time in my life, I had not considered myself in with the masses and on top of things. This time it was different; I had become part of the Other that I considered so far away from my own world at home in the U.S. Suddenly, the car bombings in Baghdad and the acid attacks on women in Kandahar were unnervingly close to home. These were not attacks on Others elsewhere; these attacks were against all Others, including me. It took nearly a year in France for me to realize that *l'etranger* was me, and there would be no more innocent pumpkin games.

Being “othered,” as a student and a teacher, gave me the impetus for further learning and purpose in education. Intersectional othering can produce “capitalization on being positioned as the other” (Jensen, 2011, p. 63). I have, since the othering experience, sought to center my research agenda in the area of teacher agency in the classroom once the teacher has been subject to being othered by being immersed in a foreign context.

### THE COMPLICATED PRESENT

The present is more than the sum of its parts. My thoughts and feelings inspired by the past, present, and future cannot be summed up in a simple tally of the past and future. The fusion of that which has changed my thinking in the past, that which is directing my thinking now, and that which I might think in the future is a tricky endeavor, but valuable nonetheless. The analysis of one's *currere* is "to descend deeper in what constitutes the present" (Pinar, 1975, p. 14). This present is a pumpkin pie of sorts in terms of its product. The individual ingredients of the past and future might be discernable via the senses, but the product (the present) is very much an item in itself, separate from its parts. No matter the influence, a simple drawing before Thanksgiving or an international terror event, I know that my present self, my present thoughts, are more accurately described as a collision of forces than a summation of facts.

When the present is analyzed as a new product in a manner of competing forces, the world is made new again. This renewal allows me to frame my present existence as a doctoral student as something that is not linear and certainly not simple. My present, professional role as an educational researcher is, contrary to my regressive illusion discussed above, a product of the chemistry of forces that interplay in complex and complicated fashion.

Take the introduction of the metaphor, for example, the winning of a pumpkin. Instead of feeling like a master of my universe, I now can see that it had little to do with me. Just a few of the many variables that lay outside the realm of my control were: (a) the time of the year—pumpkin season, (b) the budget of a *newish* teacher that would just stretch to purchasing a pumpkin, (c) my regular attendance being a collateral effect of my parents' occupations, (d) a good harvest that allowed for the existence of the pumpkin, (e) the chance drawing of my name from the hat, and so on. The many other variables that occurred outside my grasp, especially at five years old, have now taught me that the conditions of luck can be encouraged to develop (having perfect attendance to qualify for the drawing), but it is far from certain that luck will land a pumpkin in my lap. The point of view that I take, now that I consider the independent forces at play, is that, while a very little slice of the pie is due to my intervention, much more is due to the unknown elements anchored in the chaos of chance.

This present, as a product of minimal agency and maximum chaos, helps to explain the events that happened during my high school years, too. The analytical phase holds a valuable lesson to those who stroll through it. The analytical notion of *currere* seems to be the production of the present as something that is not finite, but always new and renewing. How could anyone get bored in a world such as this? Perhaps, it is because they have not bothered to acknowledge the bothering nature that is the present. After all, it is not intellectually comforting to wonder while you carve a pumpkin whether or not it is you doing the carving or if it is your past or future hope.

### AN EXISTENTIAL MEANING OF NOW

To better understand a potential answer to some of these questions of the present, the synthetical step allows the participant to peek at the present through the tinted glass of the past. Yet, this is not the only part of the synthetical phase. The synthetical phase is to find an existential meaning of now by visiting the past, analyzing the b[othered] present, and dwelling in the potential future. My past experiences and future notions give credence to the present as less of a gridded garden plot and more of a tricky puzzle. As a teacher, and a former student who favored the illusion of rose-tinted glasses, knowing the value of doing one's best despite the circumstances or outcome

has direct ties to being an effective teacher. In short, knowing that the chaos of the world may not tilt in my direction, I still can encourage its pitch toward my patch.

Relatedly, the moment I think I know about something or the unfolding of a certain set of circumstances, I must stop and observe the litany of times I have been wrong about the current product of the present. As a doctoral student, I read and listen to information in a usual way, but the challenge is to look upon a familiar topic with the hopeful eyes of discovery. It is with this method that I might peer in on a pumpkin patch and see more than a field of inactivity. The simple glance turns from a spartan ephemeron into a layered, complex phenomenon that teems with all the sound and fury of life. Perhaps, I might, instead, dwell on, as illuminated in the analytical phase, the bountiful, independent forces in all of their intersectional fury that are invisible to the eye but ripe for harvest in the mind.

The trickiness of the present is not simply an account of past experiences and descriptions of the present and then a creeping into future hopes. Suddenly, I am questioning the ingredients that comprise me, as well as the dish into which I have been poured. The redefining of the past because of its fusion with the future certainly makes the present largely uncertain and, thus, requires careful consideration when even the most familiar objects or subjects are encountered. For example, my mother taking me to school was a summation of a number of things that are infinitely more complex than her needing to be at work or me needing to learn. My dad's unstable work history, my siblings needing to be at other campuses, and my mother's need to provide continual financial support all were out of my direct control, like the fates of those Columbine students who went to class on that April morning in 1999. The result of me being at school was the litany of things, illuminated by the analytical phase, that come together to make the whole present. As we age, our direct control, like our handshake, grows in size and strength. Yet, as the synthetical phase shows, the relative size and strength of our direct control is always held in submissive respect to the totality that is the present. We can affect change, but the synthesis of our present is much more about the things that have led us here than a direct result of our own grasp.

My existence now centers on the notion of using my work and life as an inspiration for others to continue their own learning journeys—to experience their own intellectual races. It is with careful conclusion that I consider my previously dismissed notions of purpose, my *temps perdu*, my bothered presence, and my searching for hope in the future to truly understand my ontology. It is this exciting realization that I hope to show my students—no matter the quotidian boredom that comes with the life unanalyzed, one may see with new eyes at any time. It is surely a difficult thing when students of mine say that they are bored. I take it as a failure to light their candle, but then I remember that there are many more forces at play than just me as their teacher.

The intersection of these thoughts in my experience and practice as a teacher is supported by Jensen (2011), where the claim is that one may capitalize on the othering experience in both forming personal identity and acting as agent within that formation. The empowering nature of acting as your own agent of identity gives direct meaning to ones' purpose. I would like nothing more than to help others do the very same, or even more. My goal of helping others discover their own purpose and following what I hope my purpose might be is nicely summed up in the words of Marcel Proust (1919/2006):

The only true voyage of discovery, the only fountain of Eternal Youth, would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is. (p. 657)

The full grasping of the present is similar to the alchemist's desire to produce gold. Once you think you might have a touch of it, in some sort of Anti-King Midas phenomenon, the present becomes the past and the future is at hand. It is with this scene in mind that the progressive future is discussed as being a speculative hope that lives in a moment that will never submit to the timekeeper's grasp.

### THE GENEROSITY OF HOPE

I could say that, as new things come my way, I will be seeing them through my filter that has been developed from my past. However, at 15, I did not see coming the unfolding that played out on the television screen that September morning. How could I know any more at 31? It is with this thought that the future might still be viewed through rose-colored glasses full of hope. I hope to become a scholar and researcher in the world of study abroad. I hope that, whatever impact I might have, I leave my students with the inspiration to do more for others no matter their fields. Everyone should be lucky enough to feel like they can potentially change the world through their direct intervention. The essence of the progressive phase is found in its generosity of hope. This is a place where, no matter the balance of one's regressive, analytical, or synthetical conclusions, one may arrive at an aspiration of goodness to come.

I hope the future holds for me many years of giving hope, both professionally and personally, to others through my life and work. It would be easy to get stuck in a pessimistic monotony of the past; the challenge for the future, for me, is to become constant in my hope for my work and life. Certainty is the enemy of the unbridled hope that a pumpkin represents for me. The moment I am certain about something, the page turns, and I am made a fool...again. The future should parallel the hope that shadows a child's thought, no matter the age. Thus, the purpose of the progressive phase is, as long as the future is looked at with hope, to give mental comfort to the present. Yet, it is this comfort that is misleading, because achieving it is nothing less than a challenge, especially when considering the present in all of its ravenous bites. The fruit of placing hope in the future, and the challenge that presents, is nicely summed up in the words of the imprisoned Apostle Paul in his letter to Timothy. He says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7 New Revised Version). Keeping the faith and finishing the race will be a challenge after acknowledging the shadow of the past and the darkness with which it can seed the present.

It is the *currere* method that allows the caretaker of thoughts to glance in comfort at a seemingly still plot of events and to see an unquiet reality where the only stability is change. *Currere*, for me, is a reminder that, if I ever find myself in a drought of growth, I can look at the past with new eyes, bothering the present, and progressively placing hope in the future to bring a waterfall of nourishment—which is enough to grow miles and miles of pumpkins ripe for the picking.

### References

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