

# CURRICULUM FRAGMENTS: BULLIED (BULLYING)

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On average, a supernova will occur about once every 50 years in a galaxy the size of the Milky Way. Put another way, a star explodes every second or so somewhere in the universe... (Thompson, 2018)

Last year, I began writing a series of *currere* reflections (Pinar, 1994) focused on past experiences and their meaning, particularly with the idea in mind of building a series of things to say about curriculum, from a granular perspective and then a broader perspective, in ways that might have something to do with education and schooling, but perhaps even more broadly as to say something about the human condition. My intention is to write a series of these autobiographical, first-person reflections, while theorizing about my life and, thus, our lives, particularly as living, learning human beings in terms of our journeys through 7 key areas of experience and endeavor:

Loved (loving)  
Known (knowing)  
Bullied (bullying)  
Lost (losing)  
Ignored (ignoring)  
Removed (removing)  
Hopeful (hoping)

I began the journey last year in what I consider the middle of it all, with “lost,” focusing on the loss of a parent early in life. I don’t have too much else to say about the order of operations here, except that I was inspired by Mark Twain’s description of his own autobiographical journey, which ultimately eschewed any kind of chronological approach, as though one could write everything down anyway or make sense of it (the sheer volume of life’s dross negates that tack) or that one should/could plow his or her way through all of the seemingly meaningless experiences in a day. Best, instead, according to Twain (2010), to

...start it at no particular time in your life; wander at your free will all over your life; talk only about the thing which interests you for the moment; drop it at the moment its interest threatens to pale, and turn your talk upon the new and more interesting thing that that has intruded itself into your mind meantime. (p. 220)

This is what I’m trying to do with this project, though I do have in mind moving backwards through my list toward love, the actual center of it all, then proceeding back to “ignored” and making my way through to “hopeful,” which I actually am and still hope to be at the end of this journey. I’m not following Pinar’s *currere* approach strictly, but I do typically begin with the regressive, or a reflection about or story from the past. This holds for this attempt, which is my story about Stacy Turnback, Jerry Wilson, Mr. Jackson, me, and bullying.

And I can’t promise that I won’t get bored with myself or upset with my inability to pull anything together in any kind of cogent way that will move the reader. Perhaps

I'll change course in the middle of the implosion; but like Twain, I won't quit. Maybe that's free will, and maybe the entire trip is headed one determined roadway no matter what I do ... I don't know. But, no matter, it's time to talk, and there is a lot to say. That being said, the burden is on me. As the reader, you might say after a few lines, "So what?" My goal is to get you to the end without saying or thinking that.

The fact of the matter is that these fragments, these pieces of my life keep surfacing. I relive them, return to them, constantly. I see myself playing out the same story or replaying it in my mind over and over again throughout my life. They are inescapable. I cannot keep them down. And, no doubt, the story changes every single time it emerges. I am far removed from some of these occurrences now, the actual events, but these fragments keep chipping at me. They won't go away, they comfort and gnaw. But mostly, gnaw. That may say something in and of itself about the human condition, at least about mine!

One set of disclaimers is that I am not an expert on bullying, or supernovas. I am, however, a curriculum generalist, so those shouldn't be irreconcilable notions. Also, I realize that you may hate me after I tell this story. I would argue that you can't hate me anymore than I already hate myself. So, here goes. My first steps are always "regressive."

### **A BULLY IMPLODES AND PRODUCES HEAVY ELEMENTS (GOLD?)**

I had a great friend in grade school, Jerry Wilson. We weren't friends so much outside of school as we were inside of school and on the playground (the playground is still school, of course). We lived in different parts of town, so we didn't see each other much after school or on weekends. But, we went to the same K-6 public school building in our small town, with just one class in each grade. With morning and afternoon Kindergarten through grade 6, there were only perhaps 240 students and 8-10 teachers in the building. And, as many would recall from my hometown—before the building was torn down and the students in that school attendance area distributed to the remaining elementary buildings—it was a great school with strong teachers, most of whom had 20 plus years of teaching experience. Most students, and many teachers, walked to school each day. I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade during the academic year 1974-1975.

Each day Jerry and I played some sort of ball game on the playground at recess, made up our own games, or marauded around the playground mixing it up with other students and groups of kids. We started up and/or entered games others had initiated like kickball, whiffle ball, tap (sometimes tackle) football (on asphalt), 4-square, tag, etc. Anything to keep moving, to run out our energy, to play, to compete. We loved to play. There is no doubt that school was important to us, and we did well in class and liked our teachers, generally, but recess was what drove us back to school each day with interest and excitement; it kept our imaginations going, taught us how to make things work, settle differences, have fun, feel alive. The playground helped us test society, living with others, figuring it out. Sometimes, though, things went south, that is, not so well.

For whatever reason, and still to this day, I cannot really explain how all the following seemingly benign events lined up to produce the explosion they did. But, here goes.

It was our 6<sup>th</sup> grade school year in late winter before spring had broken open, when Jerry and I exited the boys' restroom where the facilities emptied out to the playground. We had just returned from lunch and got a recess period on the playground

before starting class. Then, we always got another late afternoon recess break before the last learning session of the day (the final hour or so).

The three-story school house had a first floor with boys' and girls' restrooms, a large gathering room for combined classes to watch film strips or moonshots, and a boiler room for the janitor where the teachers gathered to smoke. The second floor had four rooms, Kindergarten, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> grades, and the top floor had four more rooms for 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> grades, with an art/music room, too. A small stairway led up to a fourth story perch that housed the principal's office. You did not want to have to make a trip up that hallway staircase for any reason.

The boys' restroom exited one side of the building and the girls' restroom the other. Right outside the boys' restroom stood a large metal swing set and slide, all underneath two towering maple trees. It was an absolutely beautiful spot most of the year, especially in Fall and Spring with the leaves turning and/or budding.

Right at the top of the steps from the restroom up to the playground, Jerry and I encountered a set of maybe 4 or 5 very large, wet Nerf balls, the soccer-sized foam balls used in games by younger students; they weren't usually left lying around, always constantly finding their way into use all over the playground by 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders. Older kids never played with them because we were supposed to use the harder, red rubber balls for 4-square and kick ball and dodge ball. In this rare case, however, they no doubt just lay there because they were so wet. It had been raining all morning, and there we were facing the early afternoon sunshine. Glorious.

When we came out of the restroom, Jerry picked up one of the balls and threw it at the tree near the swings like the tree was a bull's eye; he hit it. So, I picked one up and tried to hit it, too. I remember my hands getting really wet because the balls were just saturated. And, I remember the sound as they hit the tree, "Splat!" We didn't squeeze the balls dry before throwing them, but instead threw them heavy and wet so they would carry and splat. We did this a couple of times, comparing notes, and as we retrieved the balls, we noticed Stacy Turnback on the middle swing of the swing set under the targeted tree. The balls had sailed past her; she remained unscathed. There wasn't another soul around us playing.

We retreated back to the tree and yelled, "Hey, Stacy, want to see if we can hit a moving target?"

She yelled back, "You couldn't hit me from that distance in a million years."

The challenge played, we fired.

"Ready or not!" I yelled.

From about 20 feet or so, we threw. And threw.

Skilled in the art of swinging, on the way back through her swing arc toward us, Stacy batted a few of our shots away with her feet, taunting us. And, it was on.

We took a lot of shots, and some of them hit her because as she flew away from us she had less of a defense. Now, these were Nerf foam balls, soccer-ball-sized, light, but wet enough and heavy enough as a result of the excessive moisture they had taken on to leave a damp impression on her pants and jacket when they hit her, "Splat!" We laughed and played and threw and swung.

Then, very unfortunately, one of the balls caught her square in the face. She began to protest after that but kept swinging and hitting the balls away as she swung. We kept throwing, and we knew she wanted us to stop, and we didn't. She was mad and smarting. That was the moment when... I knew I should stop but didn't. Bully.

We never really used the word bully in those days. I can't remember anyone ever saying the word or calling someone that to their face or lamenting that so and so was

such a bully after the fact. But, that's what I was, by definition. Call it what it is; call me what I am.

We caught Stacy with shots a few more times before she jumped from the swing and ran past us inside. No one ever went inside at recess unless they were hurt, had a dentist appointment, or had to tattle.

She wanted us to stop. We didn't stop. Then, she stopped. Ending it, but not quite.

It couldn't have been two minutes before our teacher Mr. Jackson came down to the playground door and called us over with the underhanded, first finger summons, you know, the "come here now" move with the index finger. We ran inside to meet him.

Inside the door he said, "Stacy just told me that you boys hit her in the face with wet Nerf balls, and she is crying. I want you to go up to the room and apologize to her, and then you come see me at recess in the room this afternoon. Okay?"

"Yes, sir."

We went to see Stacy, who was still smarting and mad at us. Silent. We apologized. She didn't say a word. We walked away, crushed. She wasn't hurt, but she was.

Mr. Jackson didn't mention anything about this event the rest of the afternoon. He never called our parents or Stacy's parents. He never told the principal, that we know of. He would handle it quickly, and for a lifetime.

When we saw Mr. Jackson at recess, he lowered the boom, not yelling, but saying: "Stacy says she asked you boys to stop hitting her with balls after she got hit in the face. Is that true?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that means that neither of you can be considered for the Ms. Trueblood Award we were planning to award for Outstanding Citizenship this year to our top graduating 6<sup>th</sup> grader 'who expresses care and concern for classmates.' I know Ms. Trueblood was one of your favorite teachers, and a great colleague, and a fair and kind and generous person her whole life. But people make mistakes, and you'll have to learn from this one. Ms. Trueblood probably made mistakes, too, but you certainly haven't lived up to her standard in this case. And, it isn't even about the award. It's mainly about Stacy, who is your friend, and you caused her pain. And, it's about you, because you should have stopped once you realized she was hurt, and you didn't. And, I think you know that. Remember how this feels."

I remember how it felt to throw the ball after Stacy said stop. I remember how it feels to be seen as a bully by Mr. Jackson. I know how it feels to hurt someone and then sit on the guilt of it for nearly a lifetime. I want to work on this for wholeness, peace, understanding. I want to forgive myself but struggle to do so, especially when I see signs periodically of that person from long ago. I also want to generate some type of understanding of how this event made me feel when I, myself, was bullied later in school. What is happening in this cycle? Who am I, then? Who am I, now? At some point, I also have to deal with the loss of my friend Jerry. We never returned to the friendship we had before this incident. It was just impossible to do.

#### **REFLECTIVE INTERLUDE: WHAT I THINK HAPPENED WITH STACY TURNBACK**

I walked away from that meeting with Mr. Jackson permanently changed. I had this gaping hole in my soul, filled by a certain fear of myself and the knowledge of what I was capable of, and I wanted to bury it, and openly control it all at the same time, so it didn't happen again. I felt guilty, and sorry, and sick to my stomach. This

feeling comes back whenever I think about those fateful moments when I hurt Stacy on purpose. After those moments, that feeling comes back when I see someone get hurt. I can't stand violence and want to do what I can to bring peace. But, peace is elusive, and sometimes anger clouds things even more, as I own the hurt and pain of someone else or nurture my own inner hurt.

I know now that I feel all of these ways because I'm not a psychopath, and that brings at least a bit of comfort. Psychopaths, according to Ronson (2012), don't feel empathy, or pain when others feel pain, especially the kind they cause. They would never even consider raising the question in the first place, which is the first step in determining if you are a psychopath. I realized, as a result of this event and the impact it has had on me for a long, long time, how awfully human I am and how hard it would be to monitor myself, to make good decisions, to be a good friend for the rest of my life. I learned what I was capable of, and I didn't want that "Tom" to emerge and act like he did at that time, ever again. I have to admit, though, that there have been other episodes, fragments of experience, a collage of bad acts that I can't even speak about out loud, maybe even worse than this one, that reveal a part of who I am that I would like to bury, to disown. But this isn't a Star Wars Movie about the fight between good and evil. This is my soul we're talking about here, and it is wrecked. I am real, not a character. Stacy is real. Jerry is real. Mr. Jackson is real. You are real, and I know you are imploding, just like me. Wrecked, and imploding.

I have carried this story for a lifetime and never told a soul, until now. Only Mr. Jackson, Jerry, and Stacy know about it to this day. Now, you know. I don't know; maybe they don't even remember it. I am certain, though, that Stacy does, though I haven't seen her for more than 35 years. I'm sorry to say, too, almost in the same breath, that that experience changed my life for the better in almost every way.

### CURRICULUM ANALYSIS

Everything extra-galactic that we observe actually happened millions or billions of years ago.... Every galaxy that we observe with our telescopes today, we see the light that was emitted millions or billions of years ago. (Rice, 2017)

I can't stop thinking about supernovas. We have known about them for a long time, but new telescope technology is yielding new insights into how stars explode and how heavy matter results from these explosions, creating new matter in the universe. I'm no scientist, and there is no way that I can reach a deeper, more scientific understanding of them in a scholarly sense in my lifetime, but I can think about them, in general terms, as I try to make my way forward as a speck in a vast universe (we are, after all, a walking bag of elements, some of them heavy!).

So, let's start with this supernova basic primer. There are two types of supernovas, and their differences are complicated, but the general idea is that, as stars die, they either explode in an amazing burst of energy as a result of increasing mass, a subsequently denser core, and an implosion that expels from the collapsing mass most of the heavy elements in our universe (such as gold), or gases of white dwarf stars in proximity collide, causing one to undergo a runaway nuclear reaction and explode in a brilliant light show (Thompson, 2018). But, this isn't a science lesson; it's a curriculum one, and I'm the subject of it. A supernova of sorts, if you will, imploding on myself and creating something new, and maybe even "heavy."

And, each of us, I'm guessing, is a constantly imploding supernova, turning in on ourselves, and remaking ourselves, even as we are dying. One way that we implode, which might not ever be visible from an outside vantage point, is by bottling up past

bad acts, sitting on them. They weigh us down, sometimes resulting in massive guilt, and subsequent personality disorders, a lack of wellness, etc., can arise in debilitating ways with debilitating results, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, and physical/verbal abuse of others. Fear of ourselves and self-loathing can drive us to self-violence and violence against others.

What kind of step is it to admit past bad acts and own them? What good does it do to surface these things, to examine them, to voice complicity in generating hurt and pain in others without any opportunity for the victim to speak, to say her piece (peace)? If I'm not a psychopath, but a relatively stable and well person, what is the power dynamic in play, and what can be the results of such an implosion? What good can it do, what aspects of social justice can even be acknowledged, seen, realized, used?

I would argue that, on the one hand, my implosion led to a million acts of kindness. I became a kinder, gentler person after this awful event. I became a better person. People who know me understand that I am intense, opinionated, sometimes irascible, and wrong, but I am kindhearted. I believe in people, that they are good, and that each one of us has something to offer the world. After all, even the most heinous of people have been embraced by their victims, and the resulting explosion of love heals, creates a new universe full of hope and possibility. Cosmic forgiveness of my indiscretion, my act of violence, or even the face-to-face personal kind of forgiveness, doesn't excuse me or clean the slate. But, it creates a new set of realities, on multiple levels, that may or may not lead to a new order.

Perhaps when we surface difficult things and tell the truth about them the best we can, we own the implosion and can, on at least a psychic, personal, and relational level, heal, maybe even forgive ourselves, and see the universe as it is exploding all around us more clearly, as both horrifying and awesomely beautiful.

Is it true that in our present political, social, cultural milieus, in this moment, that we cannot under any condition tell the truth, admit guilt, without fear of losing everything, even more than we lost before at the scene of the crime? If this is so, who are we then?

Because I was a bully, I admit now, I saw bullies differently. When Max, a senior at my high school my freshman year, took it upon himself to harass me every day after school on my way to basketball practice, teasing me verbally, even once pushing me to the gym floor as I walked by, I saw myself in him. I had no tools in that situation to fight back, I wasn't big enough, and greatly outnumbered. I realized not too much later that I threatened several of his friends' playing time that basketball season, and he proved his allegiance to them by making my life miserable. I have tried not to hold a grudge all these years, but I know I felt hurt like Stacy, embarrassed and angry, and those feelings have held. But, then and now, I feel as though the great implosion is the feeling of letting it go, of not letting it or him own me, and expressing love and forgiveness and understanding in whatever ways I am able to do so.

The problem is that I can practice this type of humane caring and love and forgiveness after the fact, with many years of distance between myself and the events, between myself and other actors. And, I wonder about the hurt and the pain that accrues each time I find myself in such a position today, either as bullied or bullying. What kind of person am I? Am I quick to forgive? Do I push myself to love first, and overwhelm the anger and hate brewing in me, as a result of fear and embarrassment?

As I struggle with all of this, how do I think I'm doing as a teacher of this subject matter? How do I teach this heavy calculus of violence, fear, and guilt to my own children, in my family, as a faculty member and administrator in higher education? As

a school partner? As a citizen? As a scholar?

How do I learn to forgive, and to love, and to be? How do I make something like gold, something heavy, something of value, out of the implosions that continue to destroy, remake, destroy, remake, cycle after cycle? How do I live on this endless treadmill? To me, this is a critical curriculum question. I don't have the answer, completely, yet. I am still imploding. Perhaps at some point my implosion will emit great light and new elements. Maybe at some point, there will be new life. Supernova. The way I figure it, it can't happen if the story is never told, and retold, etc. Every moment counts. Every moment something changes. Every moment contains potential. What will those moments be filled with, in a heartbeat, in the turn of a phrase, in a kind act?

Truth? Honesty? Forgiveness? Love?

Or Evil? Deceit? Grudges? Hate?

Or is every moment in this universe all of it all at the same time?

The answers we give have great impact on the next moment. Individually and collectively we must determine how it is we intend to live in them, with ourselves, and with each other, in ways that yield value, and good.

On average, a supernova will occur about once every 50 years in a galaxy the size of the Milky Way. Put another way, a star explodes every second or so somewhere in the universe... (Thompson, 2018)

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