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The Final Word: Nontraditional References

Timothy R. Shiner

Life has seemed difficult lately. Everything from higher education policy to student life, from the state of my own life to the state of the world feels like it needs a lot of work. I have found myself asking: Why do I work in higher education? Why do I work on social justice issues? How am I really making a difference? Where do I find hope? Then several things occurred in a short time; an art show, a children's story, a lecture, a book chapter, a video series, and a conversation. Though the correct citations for these knowledge sources are hard to find in the APA manual, these nontraditional references helped me to begin to form some answers.

Three Thresholds

Cameron Davis, painter, environmental activist, and Professor at The University of Vermont (UVM) has been displaying some of her paintings at the Women's Center at UVM. Her work conceptualizes three thresholds. The first threshold focuses on the time in which we live, which Davis refers to as Threshold Times. Our actions today could turn the world toward peace, higher learning, and justice, or move it toward ever increasing injustice, violence, and ignorance. Her work "engages the implication of the practical, ethical and spiritual opportunity our planetary crisis affords" (C. Davis, personal communication, 2004).

Central to Davis' most recent work is the concept of Limina. According to Davis, Limina is "the point at which a stimulus is of sufficient intensity to begin to produce an effect; the place or point of entering or beginning" (C. Davis, personal communication, 2004). Limina is another threshold. Davis also works with the concept of Drishti. Familiar to yoga practitioners, Drishti is the soft gaze with which one goes about his or her practice. By focusing softly in a certain direction, the rest of the body and the breath fall in line (Bender Birch, 2000). Focusing too intensely on the objective, however, can strain the vision and thus the rest of the practice. Drishti is also another threshold, the one in which we bring what we learn through our internal practice (yoga, meditation, worship, ritual, introspection, education) back into the world in which we interact with the corporeal.

The first threshold, Threshold Times, inspires us to choose a path to travel more intentionally. It is difficult today to ignore the injustice in the world as it is all around us, brought into our homes by mass media. We have the opportunity to act on this threshold to determine the future direction of humanity. The second threshold, Limina, is our point of entry, the beginning of our generation's social efforts, as we join together in everyday activism, our efforts will produce sufficient intensity to make change. The third threshold, Drishti, calls us to look with soft gaze at our goals, orienting our whole selves to peace and justice in our words, thoughts, and actions, however small. It calls us to bring the lessons we learn in our churches, meditations, classrooms, and introspections--lessons of love and honor--to the physical world. It encourages us to merge these inner lessons with the ways in which we live our lives.

As educators, we have the opportunity not only to cross these thresholds ourselves but also to guide others on their paths. I find hope in the opportunity to teach these thresholds. We can encourage students to see in the world a call to action, to recognize the way in which small actions can reverberate to create a knowable effect, to know that to see an effect we must begin the work, and to know that bringing the personal and spiritual into the "real world" can help us to end injustice.

Spirit

Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995, 1998, 2000) is the story of two forces in conflict. In Pullman's fantasy world, children are being severed from their spirit. A force called Dust fights for consciousness, for the end of oppression, and for balance and harmony with other humans and with the world itself. Major institutions use fear and violence to sever the people from consciousness, leaving them incapable of connection.

Set in a children's book, Pullman's (1995, 1998, 2000) metaphor alludes to the ways in which modern institutions, including higher education, seek to cut students off from consciousness. With a government that enacts programs such as "No Child Left Behind," a perpetual division between academics and student affairs in higher education, and a banking model that dominates U.S. education, critical thinking-- what Pullman calls consciousness--is sadly lacking. We ask students to leave their identities outside of the learning environment. They might have a chance to explore those topics in some extracurricular activity; but spirit, identity, and personal narratives do not constitute "knowledge." Though less violent than in Pullman's story, our society severs our youth throughout their education from their spirit and identity, making them mere cogs in the capitalist wheel.

Pullman's (1995, 1998, 2000) metaphor served for me as a wake-up call and a hopeful solution. In the end of the story, no side is a clear winner. Dust, the force of consciousness, connection, and balance is saved for a moment, but the institutions which seek to control all life are still powerful and circumstances have left a window which will slowly siphon Dust away. But the protagonists are given a charge. An angelic character tells them:

Conscious beings make Dust--they renew it all the time, by thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on. And if you help everyone else in your world to do that, by helping them to learn and understand about themselves and each other and the way everything works, and by showing them how to be kind instead of cruel, and patient instead of hasty, and cheerful instead of surly, and above all how to keep their minds open and free and curious . . . Then they will renew enough to replace what is lost through one window. (Pullman, 2000, p. 491-492)

As a human and an educator, I find hope in this charge, in the renewal of spirit, and in bringing what I might know from life to what is considered knowledge in the university.

Past, Present, and Future

A friend and I recently had a conversation about hope. She finds hope in knowing that however bleak our world seems, our ancestors have lived through more trying times. She thinks about those who fought to end legalized slavery in the United States of America; could they even envision the freedom for which they were fighting? Can we envision a world without injustice and violence? There is a fog of injustices so complex and varied to see through that I cannot envision that world. But I can see the next few steps along the path.

Some Native American people put forth the philosophy of the Seventh Generation, asking us to think about how all of our actions, however small, will affect our ancestors seven generations down the line. Kivel (2004) recently visited UVM and spoke of a social change organization that alters this philosophy slightly and thinks of how they can end injustice by laying the scaffolding for the next generation to build on. To think about what it would take to end oppression in our lifetime is an overwhelming prospect. But to think about how our actions can affect those around us in such a way that injustice is extinct in near generations gives me a sense of hope. I can do enough to prepare a new generation to continue the movement.

Connection

As a man working two years now at the University's Women's Center I have learned many valuable lessons. None more so than this: When a group of women gather with a common goal, a palpable connection develops and changes those involved. I do not believe this ability to create connection is inherently female. It is simply that we teach boys more effectively to think in an individualistic manner. In education and in other institutions, we teach our children to work hard to get ahead, and if that fails, get by or get out. Instead, we could be teaching them to work hard to get together (Kivel, 2004).

At the suggestion of a student, the Women's Center recently hosted a discussion forum around the *Women and Spirituality* video series developed by Read (1989, 1990, 1993). In attending each of the three forums this past semester, the lesson above has been reinforced and expanded. Synergistic human connection could and does go beyond that cultivated between women. In pre-colonial times, in cultures all over the world, women and men lived in gender balanced societies that supported the community as wholly as the individual. In Davis' Threshold Times, we have a chance to turn back toward a more community-focused way of thinking where supporting our neighbors is as important as our own needs.

There is another connection which gives me hope: the connection between our individual movements. While I may be focused on anti-sexist endeavors, others are working on environmental justice; anti-racist work; union organizing; gay, lesbian, and bisexual rights; ending transphobia; making our institutions more accessible to people with disabilities; universal healthcare; and more. Rosenberg (2000) described the ways in which feminism, environmental justice, women's health, peace, and economic justice are all entwined. Similarly, pollution, poverty, and war have a direct relationship to each other and to the reproductive health of women living in this world. "The health of the planet is the primary context for the health of all life on it" (Rosenberg, p. 138). Taken to a larger level, all of our justice related work is connected. Though none of us can hope to focus on all of these issues, it is time we recognize the context in which we work. We must refuse to fight over scarce resources or advance our cause at the expense of another. We must begin to recognize our work as part of a larger global movement.

In addition, we, especially those of us in higher education, all have privilege. Our voices can become more powerful when used in the support of others. As a gay man, I can work on ending heterosexism and likely make some advances. But I believe my impact is stronger when I use my voice as a White man to address issues of racism and sexism. We must take leadership in movements other than those that directly affect our personal identities, and we must be willing to delicately balance our leadership by refusing to take control of the movements away from those we are trying to support. The connections between our issues become stronger, and hope becomes more visible when we work in collaboration. We need to develop a recognition of these connections both within ourselves and within the educational environment we help to create.

Hope

There is hope in our world, however hard it is to feel at times. There are thresholds where everything can change as we cross Limina and Drishti. There is spirit and consciousness which enriches us in the way we seek and recognize knowledge. If we allow it to do so, it can change the world. There is our past, a strong past of activism and social change, and we honor our mothers and fathers by building the scaffolding on which new generations can continue. There is connection between us, our students, each person, the earth, and any and all work we do that is focused on making the world better for others.

There is hope, and I will grasp at it. A few nontraditional references showed up in my life at a time when I was wondering where hope went. They helped me to understand hope and reminded me of one other nontraditional reference, a performance art piece I saw a few months ago, in which the artist said:

We are plunked down at the crossroads of past, present, and present. Not past, present, and future. A crossroad is comprised of two places, not three. We need to let go of the future. We need to let go of all 8,741 negative, scary, awful futures we have been composing in our minds night after night. We need to look at the ground under our feet . . . touch Mother Earth, touch healing soil, seek prairie remnant. Understand our past, understand our present, understand that we are in the present not the future. Make our choice about whether to include hope in our present. In the actions we take to change the world, to create the world, in the personal movement we make and the larger movement we make, let us bring hope with us, let us insist on her presence.

Above the door write 'Seize hope all who enter here.' (Kadi, 2004)

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