Towards an Embodied and Spiritual Curriculum

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In the opening article of this issue, Jason Wallin observes that the Greek god Hermes was "frequently known to arrive at the last moment, offering a new course of action in the face of certain disaster. His arrival in this sense was often timely, and as such, Hermes was intimately bound to luck, chance, and sudden insights." Wallin describes Hermes as presiding over both transaction and translation, particularly at and across borderlines. In an evocative description of a student discussion about the historical meanings of Blackfoot symbols, he notes how, "like Hermes, we had abandoned the certainty of the sanctioned path or curriculum-as-plan"—an abandonment which led to the richly generative discussion described in the article. Several times in the paper Wallin reminds us of the embodied nature of Hermes—"a god of bodily action, a patron of travelers and vagabonds… renown for his athleticism and fleetness… for his affairs with goddesses, mortals, nymphs, and animals." These themes—sudden insights, transactions and translations, symbols and abstractions, moving across borderlines, uncertainty, and bodily knowing—resonate throughout the volume. And they are themes

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that the contributors, in various ways, show to be central to contemporary notions of curriculum.

Wallin's opening article is followed by a visual and epistemological feast by Suzanne Thomas. In *Littoral Space(s): Liquid Edges of Poetic Possibility*, Thomas explores the boundaries of island shores, "unfixed and in flux." Through her visual poetry, she shows how island studies (Nissology: derived from the Greek root for island, *nisos,* and study of, *logos*) are complex and ambiguous, and create spaces for "multiple interpretations and epistemological uncertainty."

More epistemological uncertainty—and unveiled criticism about ways that disciplinary knowledge of certain forms is elevated and privileged—follows with the first of three poems by Carl Leggo, *Scribbled Subjects*. Thereafter, we encounter the uncertainties and ambiguities of many traditional aspects of schooling in the article by Rahat Naqvi et David Jardine. One of the practices they unpack is that of memorization, showing it at its extremes:

> Dans plusieurs écoles élémentaires de Calgary et des alentours, les élèves écoutent et répètent par coeur, ils/elles mémorisent et régurgitent, ils/elles sont silencieux et ne posent pas de questions personnelles, voilà ce qu'est devenu ce qu'on appelle « l'enseignement traditionnel » Apprendre, selon la forme de méditation et de formation personnelle a été effacé ou mieux encore, apprendre a été assujetti au profit d'un enseignement efficace et efficient… Le professeur repartit l'enseignement fragmenté aux étudiants/es qui le reçoivent passivement, et à leur tour, ils s'en départissent dans les examens qui sont eux-mêmes façonnés sur le modèle de la fragmentation…
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> *[In several elementary schools in the Calgary area, students listen and repeat by heart, they memorize and regurgitate, they are silent and they do not ask personal questions, this is what happens when we speak of*

> *"traditional teaching". Learning, in the form of thinking and personal reflection, has been erased or, better yet, learning has been subjected in order to give way to efficient instruction... The teacher responds to fragmented instruction, the students passively receive it and in turn, abandon it during tests, which themselves follow the model of fragmentation…]*

The authors call for memorization that is embodied and contextual, claiming that memorization is inadequate unless it is applied, involves reflection, and interactions with others:

> …simple mémorisation … sans application, sans réflexion et sans méditation, sans le temps, sans l'occasion, le projet, sans l'obligation, sans les témoignages, sans la famille et les amis, sans les autres pour discuter et argumenter sur ces questions et comment vivre sans la connaissance de ces choses? Sans elles, la mémorisation est non seulement sans valeur, mécanique, imposée, elle est *ridicule*… Quand on demande à nos enfants de mémoriser, de se rappeler des choses, de se rendre mémorable, nous suggérons que les versions appauvries de « l'enseignement traditionnel » ont mal interprété ces activités. Le travail d'apprendre, comme St-Bede le suggérait, est méditatif, c'est une activité qui forme la mémoire, un procédé de composition méditative ou de souvenirs colligés, ramassés, (*colligere*) (Carruthers, 2003).

> *[Simple memorization … without application, without reflection, without thought, without time, without occasion, the task, without obligation, without witnesses, without family and friends, or others to discuss and argue about the questions and how can we live without the knowledge of these things? Without them, memorization is not only without value, mechanical and imposed, it is* ridiculous*…When we ask of our students to memorize, to retell us facts, to become memorized, we are suggesting that the impoverished versions of "traditional teaching" are poorly interpreting these activities. The work of learning, as St-Bede suggests, is thoughtful, it is an activity that develops the memory, it is a process of thoughtful*

composition or collected memories (Carruthers, 2003).]

The notions of embodiment and abstraction, conversation and curriculum, continue in the article by Susan Gerofsky and J. Scott Goble. In an intriguing two-voiced piece, they examine the abstract symbols of both mathematics and music and show how such symbols both serve the two disciplines and create distance between the embodied patterns and abstract aspects contained in music and mathematics. They observe how "[a] fascination with and perhaps an exaggerated respect for these ingenious systems of abstract symbolization often led to an assumption of the primacy and superiority of these systems with respect to the experienced patterns they represented."

A multidisciplinary approach is also contained in Sally Gradle's article, *A Spiritual Ecology: Finding the Heart of Art Education.* Again, we return to the Greeks—and to memory, to conversation, to oral histories, to the muses. She writes:

> Before the gods existed, there was Heaven (Uranus) and Earth (Gaia). As a result of their union, the large and invincible Titans were born. Although not much is known about them, we recognize the Titaness, Memory (Mnemosyne), whose role became one of helping mortals preserve the oral history of Heaven and Earth. What is translucent about this story that speaks to us today as truth? What is it that Heaven and Earth want? *To be remembered*. Memory, so the story continues, gave birth to the nine Muses, who were all of one heart, yet each with a differing gift for humankind that gave great joy: music, epic poetry, mime, tragic drama, comedy, astronomy, history, dance, and lyrical poetry. Memory's "aids," one might say, are the gifts of story, song, dance, the recollection of history, the awareness of the planets and stars, and the ability to understand the purpose of both laughter and tears.

The third of the Leggo poems, *The Syntax of Silence.* appears next. One of

the striking lines in this exposition of silence is that "silence is not inarticulate." Nor are cameo examples of big ideas—another way of saying "less is more". This issue closes with an article by Koji Matsonubu, in which he develops the argument that "deep learning can be gained through intentionally limiting one's scope of expression," using examples from the Japanese spiritual arts. He claims that a quest for everyday spirituality can promote "a realization of the most profound realities of one's world and a consciousness of the self in the fullest sense." He suggests that, "artists have long been trying to capture here-and-now moments of beauty, phenomena of suddenness and transience, and experiences of their own spiritual awakening."

In describing the Japanese tea ceremony, Matsonubu observes that the tea masters "do not try to create new objects but seek to create artful minds, bodies, and spirits through heightened perceptions that bring about holistic, intuitive views of the objects." Perhaps we would do well to take the same approach to curriculum and schooling, that is, to try to create artful minds, bodies, and spirits through heightened perceptions—and conversations and silences, memories and reflections—that bring about holistic and intuitive views of the subjects themselves.