

Book Review
***Ecological Pedagogy,
Buddhist Pedagogy,
Hermeneutic Pedagogy:
Experiments in a Curriculum for Miracles***

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Abstract:

Jackie Seidel and David Jardine's (2014) book *Ecological Pedagogy, Buddhist Pedagogy, Hermeneutic Pedagogy: Experiments in a Curriculum for Miracles* both diagnoses and offers a remedy for the ills of modern, Western education. The book is, indeed, about miracles, starting with a re-interpretation of the meaning of *miracle*, suggesting that miracle is not something imposed on a problem to effect a wondrous transformation, but the transformative effect of wonder itself. Wonder is an attitude that the authors see as arising from a pedagogy based on ecological awareness, interpretive inquiry, and most of all, from the Buddhist precept of "dependent co-arising"—the idea that all beings exist, not autonomously, but in relation with each other. The book discusses the philosophical concepts of the three disciplines as well as pedagogical practices that arise from them.

Keywords: ecological consciousness, Buddhist philosophy, hermeneutic inquiry, pedagogy, miracle, wonder

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Seidel, J., & Jardine, D. (Eds.). (2014). *Ecological pedagogy, Buddhist pedagogy, hermeneutic pedagogy: Experiments in a curriculum for miracles*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

The title of Seidel and Jardine's 2014 book proffers a tantalizing promise: a curriculum for 'miracles'. I come to the book intrigued, wondering what the authors might mean by miracles, and how the three pedagogies they mention might work that effect. I am, admittedly, expecting to read about big, wondrous transformations. I envision students cured of scholastic illnesses, rising from the dead.

In the introduction to their book, the authors state that their intentions: to show how the three disciplines, ecological pedagogy, Buddhist pedagogy and hermeneutic pedagogy, are a remedy for the educational ails of modernism. Firstly, they assert that these disciplines offer valuable diagnostic insights as

each has carefully detailed ways to decode something of our contemporary lot in education: the wide-spread dominance of models of industrial assembly as befitting teaching and learning, the fragmentation of the living fields of knowledge, and the consequent acceleration and proliferation of demands on the lives and attention of teachers and students alike. (p. 3)

Furthermore, Seidel and Jardine promise that the three disciplines offer remedy to the problems they diagnose; that they

offer vivid ways of understanding issues of identity and diversity; they provide images of stillness and a slowing of time and attention . . . they elaborate a sense of lineage, ancestry, or intergenerationality . . . they detail ideas of living fields full of relations of dependent co-arising . . . they confront head-on ideas of finitude and impermanence. (pp. 3-4)

These pronouncements, while asserting the authors' aims and claims, are not easily comprehensible in themselves, but they act as an invitation to read on to see if their promises are warranted.

The statements of the book's intentions make no mention of miracles, nor does this word appear at all in the introduction; it comes subsequently, in Chapter 1, "A Curriculum for Miracles," written by Jackie Seidel. In this chapter, Seidel clarifies what the book proposes with regards to miracles. Rather than the three disciplines effecting a miracle; it is *miracle* itself—that is, the attitude of wonder (an inherent attitude of these disciplines)—that engages transformation. Seidel makes her point by connecting from the etymological roots of the word "miracle"—Latin, *mirari*, to wonder, and *mirus*, wonderful—to the benefit of engaging wonder, of engaging "awe for life, for one another, for our home" (p. 8) as the basis for curriculum. Throughout this chapter, Seidel never expounds a definition of "a curriculum for miracles"; rather, she offers a beautifully poetic inquiry that shares rather than tells what she means. Here is a sample:

A Curriculum for Miracles breathes with a soft breath. And a fierce breath. Aware of the spark of life that flows everywhere at once and through all earth time. It knows that life is this fragile inhale and exhale that encircles the planet. It knows this breath is wondrous. It faces ecological crisis with courage and heart and knows that the sanctity and reality of death are always with us, yet also holds the spark of emergent life in its hands. It understands that schools as institutions habitually deny the imminent reality of death by casting life always into the future, and thus, it knows about time, and that breath is always now. And now again. (p. 13)

Seidel's poesis reiterates the claims of this book, that the pedagogical miracle it proposes is

located in the sense of wonder that emerges from the eco-Buddhist-hermeneutic pedagogical discipline that the authors espouse.

The book offers 16 chapters, ten of which are reprints from previous publications in journals or anthologies such as the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*; *Undivided: The Online Journal of Nonduality and Psychology*; the *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*; and the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*. The book is set up in an anthology format. It does not elaborate a linear argument for eco-Buddhist-hermeneutic pedagogy as miracle. Instead, the various articles take different tacks, offer their different “experiments,” and the authors’ messages are made through accumulative association. The chapters in this book may be categorized as two kinds: some explicate the philosophy of eco-Buddhist-hermeneutics, while others discuss pedagogical applications or practices of these philosophies.

What David Jardine contributes to this book, in his solo chapters, is an interpretation of the philosophical basis of this curriculum for miracles. He presents an integrated worldview—his own—that incorporates the three disciplines. This worldview is fundamentally based in Buddhist philosophy, which is then correlated to Gadamerian hermeneutic philosophy and to ecology. You can see this hierarchy of influence in the terminology engaged in the introduction, which speaks of “ecological *consciousness*; Buddhist *epistemologies*; *philosophies* and practices; and interpretive *inquiry* or hermeneutics” (p. 2; emphasis added).

The starting place for Jardine’s worldview is an ideological opposition to the Western principle of identity. Jardine states in Chapter 14, “In Praise of Radiant Beings”, that this principle of logic is a fundamental to Western thought and that it emerges from Aristotle’s ontological definition of substance as that which is separate and individual. Jardine charts a propulsion of this belief into Cartesian thought, repeating from Descartes that “a substance is that which requires nothing except itself in order to exist” (as quoted on p. 157). Jardine detects the same ontological perspective in Husserl’s phenomenological focus on “a world that has its being out there” (p. 157) and in Heidegger’s statement that “the essence of truth is identity” (as quoted on p. 158). However, Jardine questions this principle of identity, in particular the notion of substance as autonomous, calling this notion, as per Buddhist ideology, “false, delusional” (p. 158). He also questions the property of permanence, or fixity of being (p. 158).

Jardine sees the principle of identity as the origin of Western problems, which he enumerates elsewhere as “colonialism, capitalism, democracy, individualism, psychologism, market economy” (Jardine, 2012, p. 22) and which, in this book, are subsumed into the problem of the industrial production model of education (Chapter 7, “Story-Time Lessons From a Dog Named *Fideles*”). In place of the problematic principle of identity and its concomitant properties of autonomy and permanence, Jardine extends his own worldview, built on the Buddhist principle of “dependent co-arising” (Sanskrit: *pratitya-samutpada*; p. 154). Jardine claims that substance/being is not inherently self-same but utterly dependent, arising only in the nexus of ever-changing situations and in relation with others. In terms of identity, things, ideas, or even selves are best described as empty, as understood through emptiness (Sanskrit, *svabhavasunya*; p. 158). Further, the idea of fixity is a delusional desire (p. 167); reality is actually one of “suffering and impermanence” (p. 162), of finitude—of frailty and of death.

Jardine supports his understanding of the principle of dependent co-arising with numerous quotations from Tibetan Guleg Buddhist philosopher Tsong-Kha-Pa. He also sees

this same principle in the writings of German hermeneutic philosopher Hans George Gadamer and quotes extensively from him as well. (One might, from the extensive citations, assume that Gadamer was Buddhist as well, but such is not the case; Zimmerman (2002) describes Gadamer as an agnostic who was sympathetic to religion, in particular, the theology of his Protestant Christian heritage.) Jardine's ecological consciousness brings another level of text and evidence to the formulation of his worldview. Examples of creatures and relationships of the natural world emerge throughout his philosophical discussions; the reader encounters a variety of flora and fauna, including a frog, cats, pine siskins, cougars, bats, whales, dinosaurs and crustaceans, along with their habitats, which in the case of the frog is Basho's pond.

Seidel's contribution to this book is a reflection on pedagogical applications and practices of the writers' shared philosophy (although pedagogy is present in Jardine's solo chapters, it is not the focus). Without using any dense philosophical terms or discussion, Seidel relates ideas of an eco-Buddhist-hermeneutic philosophy, such as ecological inter-relatedness, and the frailty of human condition, to teaching situations. Seidel offers what Moules, McCaffrey, Morck and Jardine (2011) call "applied hermeneutics" and about which they say:

At its best, hermeneutics is not about hermeneutics. It is when hermeneutics is actually put to work through the act of interpreting *something* that its strengths and character appear. . . . We believe that hermeneutics is always at its best when it disappears and living topics show up in all their complexity and ambiguity. (p. 1; emphasis in original)

What makes this book stand out is its methodological practice of hermeneutic interpretation. All of the chapters engage texts, interpret texts, and exemplify ideas using texts, and these textual interactions make for very interesting reading. Reibstein and Young's 2008 children's book, *Wabi Sabi*, becomes the frame for Chapter 2, "Wabi Sabi and the Pedagogical Countenance of Names." Sato's 1983 collection of 100 translations of Basho's famous frog haiku presents a springboard for Chapter 5, "Translating Water." Canadian author Mary Lawson's novel *Crow Lake* and Canadian Arto Paragamian's film *2000 and None* give Seidel material for contemplating life's fragility and relatedness in Chapter 13, "Losing Wonder: Thoughts on Nature, Mortality, Education." Incidentally, this piece won the 2015 CACS Award for the Outstanding Publication in Canadian Curriculum Studies from the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies.

Hermeneutic inquiry is interpretation of text; the texts engaged in this book play a role as significant as the interpretations made from them. So extensive are the quotations and citations from Tsong-Kha-Pa and Gadamer, as well as other thinkers such as David Smith, James Hillman and Catherine Keller, that these authors become additional contributors to the book. And although they are not mentioned in the list of authors, I also note the inclusion of interpretive notes from student participants in Chapter 8, "Echolocations." Text is engaged in other ways, too, such as the previously mentioned use of the natural world as text. The dictionary is also engaged extensively as text, as the authors muse on prior meanings (interpretations) of a word. The linguistic reflections, the hermeneutic circle from etymology to experience, are fascinating. The French word for "experiment" is "expérience"; both words are derived from a common Latin root, *experiri*, to try. This prompts me to transliterate the titular phrase, "experiments . . . for miracles" as "practices of wonder."

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As much as I enjoyed the hermeneutic reading in this book, it is not an easy book to read; it would not, for example, serve as an introduction to the ideas of Seidel and Jardine, nor to the field of eco-Buddhist hermeneutic pedagogy. The book promises miracles but it doesn't promise certainty. The book demonstrates what it preaches: the reader is thrown into the book *in medias res*, thrown into the intertextuality of its book-life. The collection jumps like a frog from stepping stone to stepping stone, going back to previous stones, jumping out of the pond and back in again. As I result, I found that, as reader, I too needed to jump out of the pond, to gain more context into the topic of the book. With enough hopping around, the contours of the pond, the quality of the water, its taste, temperature, luminosity and depth, and the inhabitants that share this pond and its surroundings become known. I recommend reading Jardine's (2012) article, "The Descartes Lecture," as a preamble to this book. This article is a transcription of an oral address that Jardine has given as part of a methodology workshop to graduate students and it greatly assists in understanding the ideological critique that underscores Jardine's eco-Buddhist-hermeneutic philosophy. Chapter 8, "Echolocations," serves as an example of a classroom response that Jardine's lecture might prompt. Arguably, the two pieces complement each other.

Readers might find some weaknesses in the following aspects of the book. With respect to coherence, because of the desultory nature of the book's chapters, i.e. the hopping about, readers might find it difficult to gain a coherent and cohesive understanding of the authors' ontological belief system. Patience and further textual hopping around are needed. In regards to editing, as a compilation, the chapters would have arrived separate and distinct, yet it seems to me that further attention would have been beneficial. A forward contextualizing the book's content would have been helpful. A copyedit of the list of reprinted articles would have shown that dates are missing on some of the items. Also, the book engages frequent repetition of quotes, which isn't a problem in itself, yet as a reader I would have liked to feel that through the repetition, their meaning was not just signaled, but opened up. Lastly, I note that Seidel and Jardine's eco-Buddhist-hermeneutics offer a belief system, which readers will have to adjudicate for themselves. One thing I wonder is whether Jardine places undue stress on the principle of identity as predicated on properties of autonomy and permanence, rather than on properties of uniqueness or distinctness.

I recommend this book for graduate students investigating Buddhist or hermeneutic methodologies or for researchers already engaged in these disciplines. The book, or parts of it, could be used as an undergraduate text, if substantial scaffolding were provided. Chapter 1, "A Curriculum for Miracles" and Chapter 13, "Losing Wonder: Thoughts on Nature, Mortality, Education," would be useful in prompting discussion in teacher education courses. Because of the number of reprints in the book, researchers already familiar with the work of Seidel and Jardine may enjoy this collection as a holding place. As for myself, I will return to this book as I continue to develop the hermeneutic methodology of my doctoral research.

In keeping with the hermeneutic nature of this book, I close this review with my own poetic interpretation of it, my relational co-arising with the ideas of Seidel and Jardine.

Re-Sound of Water

I open the book
to an unwrinkled page:
Basho's pond,

and

at its shore, sixteen frogs
—ya—jump
—kdang!

The sound of water
ripples
my green, moist skim.

Plop—plash—
kerplunk!
Sixteen pebbles

with

webbed toes,
clang my spine
and swim my mind.

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