The Courage to Teach

Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life

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Chapter IV

Knowing in Community

Joined by the Grace of Great Things

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

—Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese"[1]

Images of Community

For three chapters, we have been traversing the inner landscape of teaching and learning. We have surveyed some inner forces that disconnect us from our students, our subjects, and ourselves, and we have explored some inner practices that can help us bridge those gaps: reclaiming selfhood, confronting fear, and thinking the world together by means of paradox.

In this chapter and the next two, we turn toward community—the kind of community that teaching and learning require, that can help renew and express the capacity for connectedness at the heart of authentic education. As we move from the teacher's inner life to community in education, it may seem that the subject is changing, but it is not. The first three chapters were about cultivating the inner ground from which community grows; the next three are about growing community from that inner ground into the classroom and the larger world.

Community cannot take root in a divided life. Long before community assumes external shape and form, it must be present as seed

in the undivided self: only as we are in communion with ourselves can we find community with others. Community is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace, the flowing of personal identity and integrity into the world of relationships. It is the same agenda of connectedness I have been exploring all along, writ large in the external world.

Here and in the next two chapters, I explore several models of community in education with one crucial question in mind: Do these models enhance and advance the educational mission of knowing, teaching, and learning? I am guided in this inquiry by an image of teaching that has challenged me for years, one that has an essential but seldom-named form of community at its core: *to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced.*

To clear a path toward the community of truth, I need to hack away some underbrush. Models of community (if not the thing itself) have grown like weeds in our society, a response to our deepening pain of disconnection and yearning "not to be cut off." I will look briefly at three that are prominent in our discussion these days—the therapeutic, civic, and marketing models—in hopes of shedding some light on the kind of community that education requires.

The therapeutic is the model most often implied when we use the word *community.* This model makes intimacy the highest value in human relationships, because intimacy is regarded as the best therapy for the pain of disconnection. An intimate relationship goes beyond an implicit capacity for connectedness: in intimacy, we explicitly share our deeper natures with each other, in the belief that we can be fully known and the trust that we will be fully accepted. At its best, therapeutic community is characterized by one of the many forms of love: between spouses and lovers, between parent and child, between good friends.

The therapeutic motif has a place in education simply because any loveless enterprise is likely to be pathological: it is hard to imagine a healthy school that lacks any trace of love for learning or for learners. I know of one college with a marvelous motto, "The pursuit of truth in the company of friends."[2] Its founders clearly understood that the rigors of that pursuit require a bond of affection between members of the expeditionary team.

But conventional applications of therapeutic community to education are neither as subtle nor as apt as that motto. On the contrary,

they threaten teaching and learning with the assumption that intimacy is the best and most important thing that can happen between people—an assumption that sometimes becomes shrill and insistent, manifesting itself in the pseudo-communal ethos of "share or die!" sometimes found in the human potential movement.

Of course, we cannot demand intimacy of each other—and when we try, we only drive each other off, as many failed communal experiments have shown. But the educational liabilities of the therapeutic model run deeper still: when all our relationships are judged by the norm of intimacy, our world shrinks to a vanishing point.

Most of us will achieve genuine intimacy with only a handful of people in a lifetime. If being in community equals being intimate, a vast range of others and otherness falls beyond our reach. When intimacy becomes the norm, we lose our capacity for connectedness with the strange and the stranger that is at the heart of being educated. We lose our capacity to entertain people and ideas that are alien to what we think and who we are. The therapeutic model exploits our fear of otherness by reducing community to whatever can take familial or friendly form.

As a middle-class North American, I am unlikely to have an intimate relation to the poor or to the experience of poverty, but it is crucial that I feel my accountability for the poor and their plight. I am unlikely to have an intimate bond with the people of the Amazon basin and their ravaged rain forests, but it is crucial that I understand my ecological interdependence with them and their habitat. As an amateur in science, I am unlikely to be on intimate terms with people who propound the strange constructs of quantum mechanics, but it is crucial that I understand how they are reshaping the world of thought in which I live.

When we reject that with which we cannot become intimate, our lives are diminished. We need a standard more encompassing than intimacy by which to affirm that a relationship—with people, nature, or ideas—has meaning. Teaching and learning are undermined when therapeutic community becomes the norm in education.

The civic model of community offers an important corrective to the therapeutic. Here, the norm is not a narrow band of intimate encounters but rather the wide range of relations among strangers that make for a healthy body politic. The community envisioned by the civic

model is one of public mutuality rather than personal vulnerability—a community where people who do not and cannot experience intimacy with each other nonetheless learn to share a common territory and common resources, to resolve mutual conflicts and mutual problems. In civic community, we may not learn what is on each others' hearts, but we learn that if we do not hang together, we will hang separately.

Therapeutic community is a modern concept, an artifact of the psychological age, but civic community grows from ancient roots. From Plato onward, the academy has been promoted as a microcosm of the body politic, a setting in which the habits of democratic citizenship can and should be cultivated. As Benjamin Barber has written, "This argument suggests not that the university *has* a civic mission, but that the university *is* a civic mission, is civility itself, defined as the rules or conventions that permit a community to facilitate conversation and the kinds of discourse on which all knowledge depends. . . . I mean to suggest much more than that democracy and education are parallel activities, or that civic training and the cultivation of knowledge and judgment possess a parallel structure. I am arguing that they are the same thing."[3]

The civic model of community has features vital to teaching and learning. In a society divided by race and ethnicity and gender, I am often moved by the fact that high school and college classrooms contain a broader cross section of people engaged in common work—and often doing it with civility, media-fueled "political correctness" wars notwithstanding—than one can find in many settings. As we reweave our tattered civic fabric, educational institutions are among our most important looms.

But the civic model also contains a subtle threat to education's core mission. In civic society, we deal with differences through the classic mechanisms of democratic politics—negotiation, bargaining, compromise. These are honorable arts in the civic arena, where the goal is the greatest good for the greatest number. But what is noble in a quest for the common good may be ignoble in a quest for truth: truth is not determined by democratic means.

In a democratic society we agree that once the ballots are counted, whoever or whatever receives the highest vote is the leader or the law of the land—and within the bounds of conscience, we

agree to follow. But in the quest for truth we make no such agreement, nor should we, for truth by majority rule is no truth at all. One sure way to miss truth in any field is to count the votes: had Copernicus and Galileo done so, the sun might still be circling the earth. For all the rightful claims that the civic model makes on teaching and learning, community in education must find a more fundamental form.

The marketing model of community is blitzing American education today under the flag of Total Quality Management. Though its aims and rationale are quite different from the models we have explored, it combines, in a curious way, the personalism of the therapeutic with the pragmatism of the civic.

The norms of the marketing model are straightforward: educational institutions must improve their product by strengthening relations with customers and becoming more accountable to them. Bill-paying students and parents must be treated as the consumers that they are and given ample opportunity to criticize their purchases. These criticisms must be passed on to the people who produce the product to help them change the way we educate people and satisfy more customers.

If you are an educator who finds talk of "customers" and "products" grating, here is a story that may speak to your condition. The new provost of a public university was talking about the weak community bonds on his large urban commuter campus. I asked, "If you could wave a magic wand, what is the first thing you would do to strengthen the sense of community here?" expecting him to talk about orientation or dorm life or counseling.

He responded, "I'd create some meaningful way to measure student reactions to the courses they are taking, and I'd use that information to help inadequate teachers get better. And if they were unable or unwilling to improve, I would help them find a different job."

The provost's concept of community may lack the psychological depth of the therapeutic model and the political nobility of the civic model, but it still has much to commend it. Whereas business is disciplined to some extent by market response, higher education has stayed aloof from its consumers. Bill-paying students and parents are often treated by academics with *lèse majesté*: we believe that no one except our peers can adequately judge our work—and we are not entirely sure about them!

In the face of that arrogance, the provost's concept of community might bring some humility to higher education, assuming that he, with the help of that magic wand, could create an evaluation system able to discern the subtleties and varieties of good teaching. But there are clear threats to teaching and learning in this version of the marketing model.

First, the evaluation system that the provost needs is nowhere in sight—and what stands in its place is a dangerous impostor. We lack reliable mechanisms for evaluating teaching, unless one believes that all varieties of good teaching can be crammed into the scales of a survey questionnaire.

Second, good education is always more process than product. If a student has received no more than a packet of information at the end of an educational transaction, that student has been duped. Good education teaches students to become both producers of knowledge and discerning consumers of what other people claim to know.

Third, good education may leave students deeply dissatisfied, at least for a while. I do not mean the dissatisfaction that comes from teachers who are inaudible, incoherent, or incompetent. But students who have been well served by good teachers may walk away angry—angry that their prejudices have been challenged and their sense of self shaken. That sort of dissatisfaction may be a sign that real education has happened.

It can take many years for a student to feel grateful to a teacher who introduces a dissatisfying truth. A marketing model of educational community, however apt its ethic of accountability, serves the cause poorly when it assumes that the customer is always right.

Reality Is Communal

The therapeutic, civic, and marketing models of community contain insights that education needs. But the comprehensive form of community that supports authentic education is not on that list. In the remainder of this chapter, I offer an alternative model. In the two chapters that follow, I will explore its implications for practical pedagogy.

The model of community we seek is one that can embrace, guide, and refine the core mission of education—the mission of knowing, teaching, and learning. We will find clues to its dimensions at

the heart of the image of teaching that most challenges me: to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced.

The hallmark of the community of truth is not psychological intimacy or political civility or pragmatic accountability, though it does not exclude these virtues. This model of community reaches deeper, into ontology and epistemology—into assumptions about the nature of reality and how we know it—on which all education is built. The hallmark of the community of truth is in its claim that *reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it.*

This is a large claim, but it can be illustrated by a small story. I was lecturing on community in education at a major research university. As I spoke, my eye was repeatedly drawn to a tall and deeply attentive listener near the front of the auditorium, a stately gentleman in his early seventies, impeccably dressed and crowned with a shock of theatrically white hair.

When our discussion began, this gentleman rose quickly and introduced himself: "I am Dr. Smith, Distinguished Such-and-Such Professor of Biology, Emeritus."

Knowing that academic savagery is sometimes preceded by mock courtliness and finding his self-introduction just a tad pompous, I drew a quick conclusion: he intends to have me for lunch—as an entrée, not a guest.

He continued, "I am not sure I understand all this fuss about community in higher education. After all, it's only good biology."

Then he sat down.

It took me a few seconds to realize that I had not been attacked but affirmed, albeit in the elliptical manner prescribed by academic etiquette. Once I understood that, the professor and I had a lively and informative exchange about the meaning of his remark.

Two or three generations ago, no professor of biology would have claimed that community was good science. On the contrary, the biologist of an earlier era would have mocked my case for educational community as a romantic fallacy that violated the cardinal principle of the discipline: life is a ceaseless round of warfare between individuals, a win-lose arena of combat and death. For that earlier generation of biologists, nature was, in Tennyson's famous phrase, "red in tooth and claw." For the Social Darwinists who built on that

image of nature, human relations were no more than the survival of the fittest, thinly coated with a veneer of civilization.

But today, our images of biological reality have been transformed. Ecological studies offer a picture of nature less focused on the terrors of combat than on the dance of communal collaboration, a picture of the great web of being. Struggle and death have not disappeared from the natural world, but death is now understood as a factor in the ongoing life of the community rather than a failure in the life of the individual.

This transformation of images of reality—from fragmentation and competition to community and collaboration—has gone on in virtually every academic discipline over the past fifty years. Physics offers another example, powerful not only because physics is one of the revered "hard" sciences but also because physics portrays the most elemental levels of our material bodies and habitats.

From its inception, physics was shaped by the image of the atom, an image that originated in pre-Socratic philosophy, then took on new significance as modern physicists gained predictive, even political power by analyzing reality into its constituent parts. When the images of reductionist science merged with the modern experience of social alienation, "atomism" became the dominant cultural metaphor of our time: we and the world we live in are only an illusion of wholeness, beneath which lies the reality of fragmentation.

But the image of reality offered by recent physics renders this sort of atomism naive. In a series of critical experiments, physicists have shown that subatomic particles behave "as if there were some communication between them," even when they are "too far apart to communicate in the time available."[4] These so-called particles, widely separated in time and space, seem to be connected in ways that make them act less like isolated individuals and more like participants in an interactive and interdependent community.

Communal metaphors come readily to physicists trying to describe the world suggested by these experimental results. Paul Davies says that they point "to a surprisingly integrationist view of the relationship of systems which have once interacted with each other, however widely they may subsequently separate."[5] Henry Stapp says, even more decisively, "An elementary particle is not an independently-existing, unanalyzable entity. It is, in essence, a set of relationships that reach outward to other things."[6]

When physicists go beyond description to ask why these particles behave in ways that are more relational than autonomous, the communal metaphors multiply. David Bohm has suggested that physical reality, much like the human genome, is made up of an invisible web of information, an incredibly complex community of coded messages, "a holistic underlying *implicate order* whose information unfolds into the explicate order of particular fields and particles. One analogy . . . is a holographic photograph, of which every part has three-dimensional information about the whole object photographed. If you cut the hologram into small pieces, you can unfold the whole image by illuminating any piece of it with laser light."[7]

Ian Barbour, a leading interpreter of modern science, offers a useful sketch of the stages that our images of reality have moved through on their way to naming "community" as the essential character of the physical world. In the medieval era, we saw reality as mental and material substance, or "stuff." In the Newtonian era, our image was atomistic, "taking separate particles rather than substances to be the basic nature of reality."[8]

But in our era, "nature is understood to be relational, ecological, and interdependent. Reality is constituted by events and relationships rather than separate substances or separate particles." According to Barbour, we are now compelled to see nature as a "historical community of interdependent beings."[9]

The first step toward understanding the community of truth is to understand that community is the essential form of reality, the matrix of all being. The next step takes us from the nature of reality to the question of how we know it: *we know reality only by being in community with it ourselves.*

Modern physics has debunked the notion that knowing requires, or even allows, a separation of the knower from the known. Physicists cannot study subatomic particles without altering them in the act of knowing, so we cannot maintain the objectivist gap between the world "out there" and the observer "in here" as posited by premodern science. Knower and known are joined, and any claim about the nature of the known reflects the nature of the knower as well.

In macroscopic fields, the symbiosis between knower and known seems obvious—especially once we have been freed from the myth that "real" science requires their separation. How can one human being know something about another, in sociology or psychology or history, without leaving the mark of the knowing self on the thing known? How can a literary critic stroll through the territory laid out in a novel without leaving the footprints of personal experience?

But the crucial, and often misunderstood, feature of relational knowing is that it turns our human capacity for connectedness into a strength. As knowers, we no longer need to regret our yearning to connect meaningfully with the other—nor do we need to "overcome" this "liability" by disconnecting ourselves from the world.

Now we can celebrate the fact that by virtue of being human, we are members of the cosmic community, quite literally: in the farthest reaches of space, astronomers have found exploding stars that are the original seedbeds of the atoms that make up your body and mine. If we were not so entwined with the cosmos, if we were here merely as observers and not participants in the world, we would have no capacity to know.

In his landmark book, *Personal Knowledge,* the chemist Michael Polanyi shows how science relies on the fact that we, by "indwelling" the world, are given "bodily knowledge" of it—an inarticulate and "tacit" form of knowledge on which our explicit and articulate knowledge depends.[10]

Without tacit knowledge, scientists would be clueless about where to turn for revealing questions, for promising hypotheses, for fruitful intuitions and insights about the direction in which truth may lie. The clues that allow us to know anything come from our relatedness to reality—a relatedness as deep as the atoms our bodies share with everything that is, ever has been, or ever will be.

Richard Gelwick, an interpreter of Polanyi's thought, has pointed out that objectivism is taken so much for granted that Polanyi's insight about the personal element of knowing has often been misunderstood, even by his proponents:

> Several times in public lectures, I heard [Polanyi] correct people who stood up to support him, [people who said] that they agreed that all knowledge had a personal element in it . . . [and] then went on to say that this personal element was the risky part and that we should try to minimize it. Polanyi would . . . explain that the personal was not to be minimized but understood as the element that was essential, the one that led us to break out and make new discoveries, and not at all an unfortunate imperfection in human epistemology. On the contrary, it is the cornerstone upon which culture, civilization, and progress were developed.[11]

The community of truth is an image of knowing that embraces both the great web of being on which all things depend and the fact that our knowing of those things is helped, not hindered, by our being enmeshed in that web. It is an image that lifts up not only our visible connections to human forms of being—with their opportunities for intimacy, civility, and accountability—but our invisible connections to nonhuman forms as well. It is a model of community capacious enough to carry the educational mission of knowing, teaching, and learning.

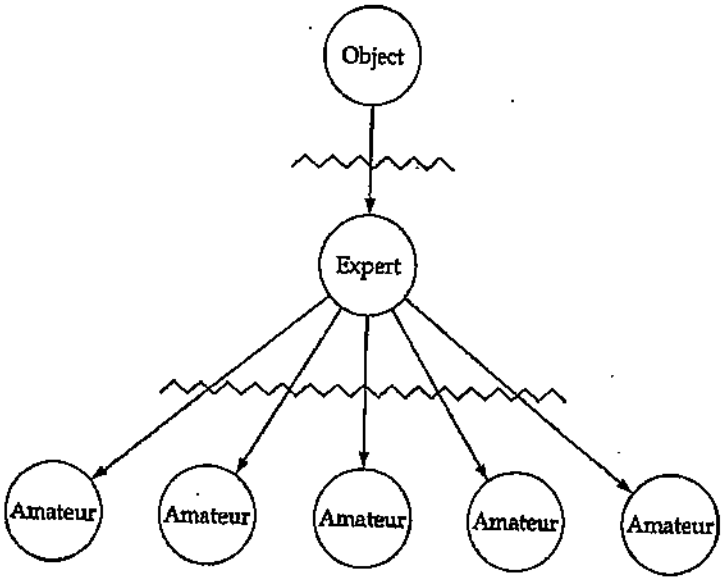
Truth Revisited

Truth is not a word much spoken in educational circles these days. It suggests an earlier, more naive era when people were confident they could know the truth. But we are confident we cannot, so we refuse to use the word for fear of embarrassing ourselves.

Of course, the fact that we do not use the word does not mean that we have freed ourselves from the concept, let alone the possibilities to which it points. On the contrary, the less we talk about truth, the more likely that our knowing, teaching, and learning will be dominated by a traditional—and mythical—model of truth, the objectivist model so deeply embedded in our collective unconscious that to ignore it is to give it power.

Because the community of truth is an alternative to this unconscious and mythical objectivism, it will be easier to describe my vision of educational community and how it works if I first raise the objectivist myth to visible form, which I do in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1. *The Objectivist Myth of Knowing.*



This mythical but dominant model of truth-knowing and truth-telling has four major elements:

1. *Objects* of knowledge that reside "out there" somewhere, pristine in physical or conceptual space, as described by the "facts" in a given field.
2. *Experts,* people trained to know these objects in their pristine form without allowing their own subjectivity to slop over onto the purity of the objects themselves. This training transpires in a far-off place called graduate school, whose purpose is so thoroughly to obliterate one's sense of self that one becomes a secular priest, a safe bearer of the pure objects of knowledge.
3. *Amateurs,* people without training and full of bias, who depend on the experts for objective or pure knowledge of the pristine objects in question.

4. *Baffles* at every point of transmission—between objects and experts, between experts and amateurs—that allow objective knowledge to flow downstream while preventing subjectivity from flowing back up.

The image of baffles came to me on overhearing a marvelous remark: "We don't seem to mind if civilization goes down the drain, as long as the drain doesn't back up!" Objectivism, obsessed with the purity of knowledge, wants to avoid the mess of subjectivity at all costs—even if the cost is the "decivilizing" kind of knowledge that renders us unfit for the messiness of life.

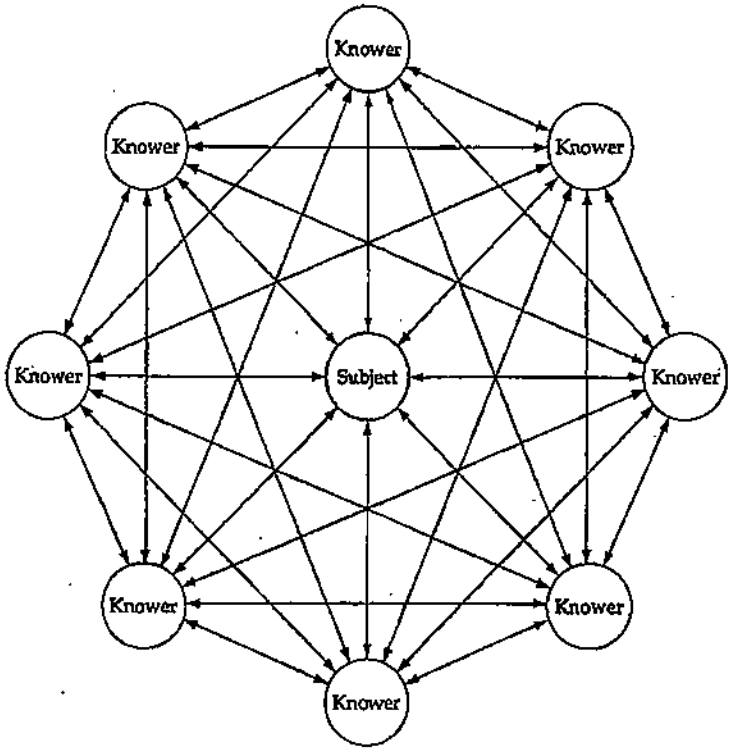
In the objectivist myth, truth flows from the top down, from experts who are qualified to know truth (including some who claim that truth is an illusion) to amateurs who are qualified only to receive truth. In this myth, truth is a set of propositions about objects; education is a system for delivering those propositions to students; and an educated person is one who can remember and repeat the experts' propositions. The image is hierarchical, linear, and compulsive-hygienic, as if truth came down an antiseptic conveyer belt to be deposited as pure product at the end.

There are only two problems with this myth: it falsely portrays how we know, and it has profoundly deformed the way we educate. I know a thousand classrooms where the relationships of teacher, students, and subject look exactly like this image. But I know of no field—from astronomy to literature to political science to theology—where the continuing quest to know truth even vaguely resembles this mythical objectivism.

The community of truth represents knowing quite differently (see Figure 4.2). In the community of truth, as in real life, there are no pristine objects of knowledge and no ultimate authorities. In the community of truth, as in real life, truth does not reside primarily in propositions, and education is more than delivering propositions about objects to passive auditors. In the community of truth, knowing and teaching and learning look less like General Motors and more like a town meeting, less like a bureaucracy and more like bedlam.

The community of truth is, in fact, many communities, far-flung across space and ever-changing through time. I name it with a

Figure 4.2. *The Community of Truth.*



singular noun because in any given field, the many are made one by the fact that they gather around a common subject and are guided by shared rules of observation and interpretation that require them to approach the subject in the same way. Thus biologists in twentieth-century America and Linnaeus and his colleagues in eighteenth-century Sweden, despite their vast differences in theory and technique, are one, giving this form of community a longevity and reach that make it one of our most powerful social forms.

At the center of this communal circle, there is always a subject—as contrasted with the object at the top of the objectivist ladder. This distinction is crucial to knowing, teaching, and learning: *a subject is available for relationship; an object is not.* When we know the other as

a subject, we do not merely hold it at arm's length. We know it in and through relationship, the kind of relationship Barbara McClintock had with the corn plants that she studied.

This relationship begins when we allow the subject to occupy the center of our attention, exactly as the diagram suggests. This contrasts sharply with objectivism, which puts the expert at the center of our attention: in objectivism, the objects of knowing are so far beyond our reach that the expert is the only party with whom we can connect.

When we make the subject the center of our attention, we give it the respect and authority that we normally give only to human beings. We give it ontological significance, the significance that Barbara McClintock gave to an ear of corn, acknowledging its unique identity and integrity.[12] In the community of truth, the connective core of all our relationships is the significant subject itself—not intimacy, not civility, not accountability, not the experts, but the power of the living subject.

As we try to understand the subject in the community of truth, we enter into complex patterns of communication—sharing observations and interpretations, correcting and complementing each other, torn by conflict in this moment and joined by consensus in the next. The community of truth, far from being linear and static and hierarchical, is circular, interactive, and dynamic.

At its best, the community of truth advances our knowledge through conflict, not competition. Competition is a secretive, zero-sum game played by individuals for private gain; conflict is open and sometimes raucous but always communal, a public encounter in which it is possible for everyone to win by learning and growing. Competition is the antithesis of community, an acid that can dissolve the fabric of relationships. Conflict is the dynamic by which we test ideas in the open, in a communal effort to stretch each other and make better sense of the world.

This communal dynamic is governed by rules of observation and interpretation that help define us as a community by bringing focus and discipline to our discourse. To be in the community of truth, we must abide by its norms and procedures, which differ from one field to another, from art history to chemistry to philosophy. These standards are strong but not chiseled in stone: they evolve,

even as our understanding of a subject evolves. We can challenge and change the norms, but we must be able to justify any deviation from them in a public and compelling way.

Implicit in this exploration of how we know is an image of truth that can now be made explicit: *truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.*

Unlike the objectivist, I do not understand truth to be lodged in the conclusions we reach about objects of knowledge. How could it be, since the conclusions keep changing? I understand truth as the passionate and disciplined process of inquiry and dialogue itself, as the dynamic conversation of a community that keeps testing old conclusions and coming into new ones.

We need to know the current conclusions in order to get in on the conversation. But it is not our knowledge of conclusions that keeps us in the truth. It is our commitment to the conversation itself, our willingness to put forward our observations and interpretations for testing by the community and to return the favor to others. To be in the truth, we must know how to observe and reflect and speak and listen, with passion and with discipline, in the circle gathered around a given subject.

If truth is an eternal conversation whose conclusions and norms keep changing, what happens to the idea of objective knowledge? I do not think that my image of truth alters anything about the nature of objectivity—except the objectivist myth.

As far as I can tell, the only "objective" knowledge we possess is the knowledge that comes from a community of people looking at a subject and debating their observations within a consensual framework of procedural rules. I know of no field, from science to religion, where what we regard as objective knowledge did not emerge from long and complex communal discourse that continues to this day, no field where the facts of the matter were delivered fully formed from on high.

The firmest foundation of all our knowledge is the community of truth itself. This community can never offer us ultimate certainty—not because its process is flawed but because certainty is beyond the grasp of finite hearts and minds. Yet this community can do much to rescue us from ignorance, bias, and self-deception if we are willing to submit our assumptions, our observations, our theories—indeed, ourselves—to its scrutiny.

In rejecting the objectivist model, I have not embraced a relativism that reduces truth to whatever the community decides, for the community of truth includes a transcendent dimension of truth-knowing and truth-telling that takes us beyond relativism and absolutism alike. The clearest and most compelling naming of that dimension is found in a couplet by Robert Frost: "We dance round in a ring and suppose,/ But the Secret sits in the middle and knows."[3]

Frost honors the transcendent secret of the subject at the center of the community of truth, a secret that is equally obscured by absolutism, which claims that we can know the full reality of things, and by relativism, which claims that things have no reality save what we know. The subject knows itself better than we can ever know it, and it forever evades our grasp by keeping its own secrets.

If this were not the case, the process of knowing would have long ago come to a halt. Why did we not settle for the pre-Socratic view of the nature of the physical world or the medieval view or the view of early modern science? Why are we pressing, even now, on the view we hold today? Because at the center of our attention is a subject that continually calls us deeper into its secret, a subject that refuses to be reduced to our conclusions about it.

The idea of a subject that calls to us is more than metaphor. In the community of truth, the knower is not the only active agent—the subject itself participates in the dialectic of knowing. It is as Mary Oliver says: "The world offers itself to your imagination,/ calls to you like the wild geese . . . ,/. . . announcing your place / in the family of things."[4]

We say that knowing begins in our intrigue about some subject, but that intrigue is the result of the subject's action upon us: geologists are people who hear rocks speak, historians are people who hear the voices of the long dead, writers are people who hear the music of words. The things of the world call to us, and we are drawn to them—each of us to different things, as each is drawn to different friends.

Once we have heard that call and responded, the subject calls us out of ourselves and into its own selfhood. At the deepest reaches, knowing requires us to imagine the inner standpoint of the subject—of that historical moment, of that literary character, of that rock, or of that ear of corn. As one research scientist has said, "If you want to really understand about a tumor, you've got to *be* a tumor."[5]

We cannot know the subject well if we stand only in our own shoes. We must believe in the subject's inner life and enter with empathy into it, an empathy unavailable to us when we neither believe in nor cultivate an inner life of our own. When we deny or disparage the knower's inner life, as is the objectivist habit, we have no capacity to intuit, let alone inhabit, the inwardness of the known.

The sort of science done by Barbara McClintock requires one to fathom the mystery of self in order to fathom the mystery of the world, to become—as a colleague said of McClintock—"someone who understands where the mysteries lie" rather "than someone who mystifies."[16]

As we gather around the subject in the community of truth, it is not only we who correct each other's attempts at knowing, rejecting blurry observations and false interpretations. The subject itself corrects us, resisting our false framings with the strength of its own identity, refusing to be reduced to our self-certain ways of naming its otherness.

Eventually, as our insight deepens, the subject yields to a certain naming, and we conclude that we know it. But the transcendent subject always stands ready to take us by surprise, calling us into new observations, interpretations, and namings and into the mystery that can never be fully named.

Openness to transcendence is what distinguishes the community of truth from both absolutism and relativism. In this community, the process of truth-knowing and truth-telling is neither dictatorial nor anarchic. Instead, it is a complex and eternal dance of intimacy and distance, of speaking and listening, of knowing and not knowing, that makes collaborators and co-conspirators of the knowers and the known.

The Grace of Great Things

The community of truth is an image that can carry the educational mission because it embraces an essential fact: the reality we belong to, the reality we long to know, extends far beyond human beings interacting with one another. In the community of truth, we interact with nonhuman forms of being that are as important and powerful as the human and sometimes even more so. This is a community held together not only by our personal powers of thought and feeling but also by the power of "the grace of great things."[17]

That phrase comes from an essay by Rilke. When I read it, I realized that our conventional images of educational community ignore our relationships with the great things that call us together—the things that call us to know, to teach, to learn. I saw how diminished the educational community becomes when it excludes the grace of great things and relies entirely on our own quite limited graces.

By *great things,* I mean the subjects around which the circle of seekers has always gathered—not the disciplines that study these subjects, not the texts that talk about them, not the theories that explain them, but the things themselves.

I mean the genes and ecosystems of biology, the symbols and referents of philosophy and theology, the archetypes of betrayal and forgiveness and loving and loss that are the stuff of literature. I mean the artifacts and lineages of anthropology, the materials of engineering with their limits and potentials, the logic of systems in management, the shapes and colors of music and art, the novelties and patterns of history, the elusive idea of justice under law.

Great things such as these are the vital nexus of community in education. It is in the act of gathering around them and trying to understand them—as the first humans must have gathered around fire—that we become who we are as knowers, teachers, and learners. When we are at our best, it is because the grace of great things has evoked from us the virtues that give educational community its finest form:

- We invite *diversity* into our community not because it is politically correct but because diverse viewpoints are demanded by the manifold mysteries of great things.
- We embrace *ambiguity* not because we are confused or indecisive but because we understand the inadequacy of our concepts to embrace the vastness of great things.
- We welcome *creative conflict* not because we are angry or hostile but because conflict is required to correct our biases and prejudices about the nature of great things.

- We practice *honesty* not only because we owe it to one another but because to lie about what we have seen would be to betray the truth of great things.
- We experience *humility* not because we have fought and lost but because humility is the only lens through which great things can be seen—and once we have seen them, humility is the only posture possible.
- We become *free* men and women through education not because we have privileged information but because tyranny in any form can be overcome only by invoking the grace of great things.

Of course, the educational community is not always at its best! We can easily cite instances when the community of truth has been driven by the antithesis of virtues such as these. *The Double Helix* is a book that chronicles such a case: the discovery of DNA by James Watson and Francis Crick, a case in which ego and competition, pigheadedness and greed, are shown to lie at the heart of the academic enterprise.[18]

So it intrigues me that the two principals in that story, interviewed on the fortieth anniversary of their discovery, spoke about the way certain virtues have overtaken them since they first encountered the great thing called DNA.

James Watson said, "The molecule is so beautiful. Its glory was reflected on Francis and me. I guess the rest of my life has been spent trying to prove that I was almost equal to being associated with DNA, which has been a hard task."

Then Francis Crick—of whom Watson once said, "I have never seen him in a modest mood"—replied, "We were upstaged by a molecule."[19]

Crick's humility may be uncharacteristic and strained, but that only makes it a more compelling example of the power of the community of truth—a community in which even our own agendas are sometimes upstaged by the grace of great things. When the great things disappear, when they lose their gravitational pull on our lives, we fall out of the communal orbit into the black hole of posturing, narcissism, and arrogance.

How do the great things disappear? They dim, if they do not disappear altogether, when the image of community that forms (or deforms) education has more to do with intimacy, majority rule, or marketing than with knowing, teaching, and learning. But there is a deeper threat to great things: they are killed off by an intellectual arrogance that tries to reduce them to nothing more than the machinations of our minds.

The great things disappear in the face of both absolutism and relativism. With absolutism, we claim to know precisely the nature of great things, so there is no need to continue in dialogue with them—or with each other. The experts possess the facts, and all that remains is for them to transmit those facts to those who do not know. With relativism, we claim that knowledge depends wholly on where one stands, so we cannot know anything with any certainty beyond our personal point of view. Once again, there is no need to continue in dialogue with great things or with each other: one truth for you, another for me, and never mind the difference.

Of course, the great things do not disappear in reality—they only disappear from our view. The great things themselves survive all the assaults of human arrogance, for they are the irreducible elements of life itself and of the life of the mind. The question is, will we abandon the arrogance that claims either to know the world perfectly or to invent the world at will? Will we acknowledge the independent reality of great things and their power to work on our lives?

We will experience the power of great things only when we grant them a life of their own—an inwardness, identity, and integrity that make them more than objects, a quality of being and agency that does not rely on us and our thoughts about them.

To understand this more fully, we need only look at what happens when we rob great things of their integrity. In the study of literature, it is now common to teach classic texts through analytical lenses that show how riddled they are with the biases of their authors and their times. From this standpoint, it does not matter that *Moby Dick* reaches deep into such great things in the human experience as hubris and destiny. It matters only that Melville was a patriarchal bigot.

David Denby has shown the hubris of this posture itself: it gives us, teachers and students alike, feelings of superiority to the text, thereby depriving us of the chance to learn anything from it except how superior we are.[20] It is impossible to be in a learning relationship with a text or a person that one regards as morally bankrupt. When

we reduce great things to such dismissive categories, we rob them of their selfhood and deprive them of their voice.

It is not cheap mysticism to claim that all great things have inner lives that will speak to our own—if we let them. Literary texts are merely the clearest example of such voices, voices that reach us with astonishing clarity across huge gaps of space and time. The history of the Third Reich speaks a voice of evil that if I listen carefully to it, will find echoes in my own soul.

A marine biologist can pick up a seashell and, through careful listening, learn much about what happened in the lifetime of its inhabitant and in the evolution of its species. Every geologist knows that even the rocks speak, telling tales across gaps of time far wider than recorded history, stories we would not know if human vocalization were the only speech we could hear.

Annie Dillard titled one of her books *Teaching a Stone to Talk,* but the real issue, as Dillard knows, is teaching ourselves to listen.[21] The inner life of any great thing will be incomprehensible to me until I develop and deepen an inner life of my own. I cannot know in another being what I do not know in myself.

The conclusion seems clear: we cannot know the great things of the universe until we know ourselves to be great things. Absolutism and relativism have ravaged not only the things of the world but our sense of the knowing self as well. We are whiplashed between an arrogant overestimation of ourselves and a servile underestimation of ourselves, but the outcome is always the same: a distortion of the humble yet exalted reality of the human self, a paradoxical pearl of great price.

I once heard this Hasidic tale: "We need a coat with two pockets. In one pocket there is dust, and in the other pocket there is gold. We need a coat with two pockets to remind us who we are."[22] Knowing, teaching, and learning under the grace of great things will come from teachers who own such a coat and who wear it to class every day.

Knowing and the Sacred

The images of knowing central to this chapter—the community of truth, the grace of great things, the transcendent subject, the "Secret" that "sits in the middle and knows"—these images emerge, for me, from my experience of reality as sacred and of the sacred as real. Others may arrive at similar understandings from different starting points. But I believe that knowing, teaching, and learning are grounded in sacred soil and that renewing my vocation as a teacher requires cultivating a sense of the sacred.

I am well aware that the marriage of knowing and the sacred has not always produced admirable offspring. But the history of education will show that spirituality is no worse than secularism in its propensity to sow bad seed. I know of no religious pathology, from fear to bigotry to rigid orthodoxy, that is not also found in secular form, comfortably ensconced in the groves of academe. The health of education depends on our ability to hold sacred and secular together so that they can correct and enrich each other.

What do I mean by *sacred?* It is a paradoxical concept—as one would expect when exploring the most profound truth of all. On one hand, the word points to an ineffable immensity beyond concept and definition, the sacred as Rudolf Otto defined it in *The Idea of the Holy*—the *mysterium tremendum,* the numinous energy at the heart of reality.[23] On the other hand, sacred means, quite simply, "worthy of respect." Access to the *mysterium tremendum* is not a staple of my daily experience, so I cannot depend on a steady stream of numinosity to renew my teaching. But I can practice continuous respect for the great things of the world.

Many critics have noted the growing disrespect inherent in our social relations and the sad implications of such incivility for the future of democracy. But fewer have noticed our growing disrespect for the "grace of great things" and its sad implications for the future of teaching and learning and the life of the mind.

In a culture of disrespect, education suffers the worst possible fate—it becomes banal. When nothing is sacred, deemed worthy of respect, banality is the best we can do. What could be more banal than to stand in the midst of this astonishing universe, sifting its wonders through reductionist screens, debunking amazement with data and logic, downsizing mystery to the scale of our own minds? The root of all banality—including, as Hannah Arendt named it, "the banality of evil"—is our failure to find the other worthy of respect.[24]

In a world stripped of the sacred, the inner landscape holds no mystery, for it has no variety. Traveling through it, one does not

move from prairie to woods to water, from desert to mountain to valley, from the plotted and cultivated to the primal and wild. The desacralized landscape is utterly flat, bereft of texture and tangle, color and flair—and traversing it soon becomes tedious beyond telling.

If this were only an aesthetic failure, it would be bad enough. But the flatness of the desacralized landscape breeds more than sensory fatigue. It creates a specific spiritual pathology that diminishes our ability to know, to teach, to learn: we lose our capacity for surprise.

In a sacred landscape, with its complexities and convolutions, surprise is a constant companion: it lies just around the bend or hidden in the next valley, and though it sometimes startles us, it often brings delight. But on the flatlands of a desacralized world, where we grow accustomed to seeing things approaching us long before they arrive, surprise is neither expected nor welcomed. When it suddenly arises, apparently out of nowhere, we are stricken with fear and may even respond with violence.

This is what happens in academic culture when we are surprised by a new idea that does not fit our conventional frame—for example, the pedagogical insight that feelings are as important as facts or Barbara McClintock's scientific hypothesis that genes "jump" or are transposable.

We do not always welcome such novel notions. Instead, we swat them away as irritating nonsense; depending on the stakes, we may even try to destroy them, as if they were enemies on the battlefield trying to gain strategic advantage. The geneticist James Shapiro summarizes this pattern of resistance nicely: McClintock's news of transposable elements, he points out, is "an example of how new ideas are accepted coldly by the scientific community." When McClintock first announced the phenomenon, people called her crazy; "then they said it's peculiar to maize; then they said it's everywhere but has no significance; and then finally they woke up to its significance."[25]

It is possible to respond differently to surprises, to allow one new idea to generate yet another in us—a process sometimes called thinking. But in a flattened, desacralized culture, thinking is not what happens when we are taken—or threatened—by surprise. Instead, we reflexively defend ourselves by reaching for a weapon that we know how to use, an old idea whose use we mastered long ago.

To think a new thought in this moment of danger would leave us open and vulnerable, for we do not know what flank it might leave exposed. So we grab an old idea, a conceptual club we know how to use because we have swung it many times before, and we beat the surprise to death—or we run away before it can make a mark on our minds. Startled by otherness, reacting out of fear, we destroy the possibility of learning anything new by allowing the ancient fight or flight syndrome to have its way.

This reflex is rooted in a million years of evolution, so it may seem inexorable. Yet there is some physiological evidence that this need not be the case.[26] Normally, when we are taken by surprise, there is a sudden narrowing of our visual periphery that exacerbates the fight or flight response—an intense, fearful, self-defensive focusing of the "gimlet eye" that is associated with both physical and intellectual combat. But in the Japanese self-defense art of aikido, this visual narrowing is countered by a practice called "soft eyes," in which one learns to widen one's periphery, to take in more of the world.

If you introduce a sudden stimulus to an unprepared person, the eyes narrow and the fight or flight syndrome kicks in. But if you train a person to practice soft eyes, then introduce that same stimulus, the reflex is often transcended. This person will turn toward the stimulus, take it in, and then make a more authentic response—such as thinking a new thought.

Soft eyes, it seems to me, is an evocative image for what happens when we gaze on sacred reality. Now our eyes are open and receptive, able to take in the greatness of the world and the grace of great things. Eyes wide with wonder, we no longer need to resist or run when taken by surprise. Now we can open ourselves to the great mystery. Now we can invite our students into the great affair that Diane Ackerman writes about, the affair called living and learning: "The great affair, the love affair with life, is to live as variously as possible, to groom one's curiosity like a high-spirited thoroughbred, climb aboard, and gallop over the thick, sun-struck hills every day. Where there is no risk, the emotional terrain is flat and unyielding, and, despite all its dimensions, valleys, pinnacles, and detours, life will seem to have none of its magnificent geography, only a length. It began in mystery, and it will end in mystery, but what a savage and beautiful country lies in between."[27]

CHAPTER IV

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26. I am grateful to Dawna Markova, scholar and practitioner in the field of bodily knowing, for information about the fight or flight syndrome, "soft eyes," and the practice of aikido. For more on these subjects, see Andy Bryner and Dawna Markova, *An Unused Intelligence* (Berkeley, Calif.: Conari Press, 1996).
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