

Teaching with love: how may I continue to improve my practice as I get older?

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Abstract

Thayer-Bacon (2003) defines (e)pistemology as a form of knowing and knowledge that is unique to the individual and makes no assumptions that there is some universally defined Knowledge. In the same way I use the term (o)ntology to refer to my own experience of 'being' and not a category that assumes can be experienced by everyone. This paper revisits the relation between (o)ntology, (e)pistemology and my practice, which was the focus of my doctorate written in 2006. I continue to use the terms (o)ntology and (e)pistemology to indicate my individual experience of 'being' and 'knowing'.

Thayer-Bacon also distinguishes between epistemology-in-general and relational epistemology: that is knowledge derived through connection, response and resolution of difference. It is here, at the boundary between inner 'knowingness' and outward action that I find new meaning and new ways of acting which leads me to distinguish between values and skills in the pedagogic relation (Bernstein, 2000). I learn (and write) iteratively, building one set of meanings upon another. This way of learning starts with an embodied perception arising in meditation, which is the (o)ntological experience; articulating the experience (either by thinking, speaking or writing) becomes 'knowing' which is my (e)pistemology; relational epistemology is what I learn through social interactions and teaching; the explanation of this learning is my living-theory. As a teacher of yoga and meditation I aim to support the spiritual development of my students in whatever individual ways they make meaning. It is a love-informed teaching practice that seeks to nurture development and based on the ideas of Ruddick (1989) writing about fostering growth in children, and Fletcher (2001) researching the unrecognised ways in which women contribute to projects within engineering organisations.

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Preface

Introduction

The title of my doctorate (Lohr, 2006), written 10 years ago, was, 'What is my experience of love, and how may I become an instrument of love's purpose?' My research premise was that love as a quality has a life of its own that is not specific to any particular time, culture or belief, that is not attached to the physical world or to human persons, but is manifested in various forms, which is understood and defined both emotionally as well as physically, within the frame of our own culture and customs.

My understanding of love, unconditioned by culture or custom, arose as I was being taught meditation by 'M' during which I felt a momentary experience of complete acceptance. I had never met 'M' before that teaching, and he did not know who I was. Later I learned that he came from a Hindu/Christian tradition, but that his beliefs did not matter because he was teaching a technique with a loving intention that goes beyond the boundaries of the material world as I/we understand it. Over the years as I meditated, I began to 'see' the value of the truths contained in all religions and all beliefs that take the follower beyond the levels of everyday consciousness. And I also began to realize that the more I focused inwardly the more able I was to live better outwardly, in the social world and that there was a direct relation between 'being' and 'acting', which I had to find ways of articulating. I described this as acting with a "pedagogy of loving presence."

I started inquiring by writing, allowing the words to flow out of the physical sensation and then going back later to reflect and make sense of the words, repeating this over several iterations. The initial inquiry was infused with feeling and completely subjective; I refused to accept that being rational was equivalent to being value-free. By being deliberately subjective, fully accepting of my intuitive self, I looked for ways of acting in the world that would enable me to make better connections with people and the organisations I worked in.

I wrote at the time, 'My propositional knowledge develops in the gaps between accounts of my practice and my lived experience of practice' (Lohr, 2006 p. 110). I came understand that if I was able to hold an embodied sensed memory of unconditional love my loving intention could be transferred through physical presence, which then influenced my actions and my speech. I based this assertion on Bernstein's theories of the tacit transmission, which he maintains takes place within pedagogic discourse (Bernstein, 2000, p. 173), and described as acting with an embodied memory of love, a 'pedagogy of loving presence'.

Two paragraphs from the original inquiry encapsulated my starting point (Lohr, 2006):

... I learn through the skin, rather than through the brain, my learning is an absorptive bodily process, rather than a brainy intellectual process. This does not mean that my (e)pistemology is thoughtless, but that the route my thinking takes is not adequately represented in analytic categories. (p. 294)

And also, 'I see that if I truly live my practice then I would be enabled to bring the experience of the divine into shared relational spaces, and in this way it is possible to become an instrument of love's purpose' (ibid.).

Why do I Teach?

This is the question asked by one of my peer-reviewers. The simplest answer is because 'M' asked me to! Working full-time as a manager before I retired, one of my greatest pleasures was to coach more junior members of staff to help them develop their careers. Whilst teaching is not managing, it is a way of giving what I have received, an opportunity to pass on to others what I know, and in doing so to encourage a greater awareness of the possibility of a spiritual or transcendent way of being. The loving way that encourages this type of personal development has been described by Ruddick (1989) as 'fostering growth', that is, understanding when a person is ready to move on to the next stage of development, and to respond to that readiness. The aim of this 'growing' is to enable a person to look deliberately at what s/he really wants from life and to find ways of learning for themselves how that might be achieved.

Another of my peer reviewers asks, 'What does teaching really mean to you?' which is such a good question, particularly as my teaching appears to be such a struggle. The struggle (a challenge would be a better way of putting it) comes not so much in teaching the skills but in the quality of the 'pedagogic transfer' (Bernstein, 2000), the 'pedagogy of loving presence' (Lohr, 2006). My aim is to support the spiritual confidence and development of the people I teach which will arise not only from teaching techniques, but through a value-based, loving, pedagogic transmission. In this way an embodied loving presence is integral to the learning of skills (Hocking, Haskell & Linds, 2001). If as I teach I do not feel an embodied sense of love then I suspect that I do not teach what I espouse. That is what this inquiry is concerned with.

Living Educational Theory: Generating Educational Knowledge

This inquiry took place over a period of three years and is a development of my original focus which was to 'let love show me the way'. Now the focus is on the inevitable contradictions: between my aspiration to live asking, 'love to show me the way', and the reality of living a life which is often demanding and creates some anguish. As before, I inquire by writing through feeling and then reflecting.

This latest inquiry has consolidated the learning of my earlier educational journey. Using the skills learned previously when writing my doctorate, I have developed a more intuitive approach, which is my living-theory-methodology naturally aligned with, and integral to, my living theory. Here, following Bernstein (2000), I make the distinction between skill and value. I first had to learn and understand the skill of first-person research (Heron & Reason, 2001) and self-study approaches before developing my own methodological approach (Whitehead, 1988, 2008).

This is an account of an educational journey, which shows I develop my propositional knowledge by reflecting on my personal feelings about teaching. It is not possible to represent (o)ntological experiences with words, but writing and reflecting with feeling is a deliberate attempt to disrupt my habitual ways of thinking, to develop my knowing, my (e)pistemology. This is the interface between being, feeling and language. Having written out my concerns in my journal, I can 'see' them more clearly. I develop ideas and plan what I might do differently by reading about the ideas of others. The next step is to bring this 'knowing' into the preparation and act of teaching. I see teaching as relational epistemology, a process of teaching and learning through the connections made together with others. Whilst this may seem to some readers to be more about my learning than my students' learning, my account is based on the premise that the deeper the inward connection I make in meditation, the better I understand and accept my motives and feelings, then the greater the possibility of making an appropriate and loving, tacit, pedagogic transfer as I teach.

2012: Beginning the Inquiring Process: My Concerns

After standing down as Chair of a local-housing association and six years after completing my doctorate I began to have severe doubts about my continued capacity to sustain a 'pedagogy of loving presence' in my practice as a yoga and meditation-teacher. That sensed memory of love did not feel as strong as it had once been and I felt bored and stuck in repetition. Since asking the question about how love and presence can be brought into action, I had lost the thread of thought and the sensuous connection of loving presence. My energies have been directed more by pragmatism, by the need to care for my family, by my commitment to teaching yoga.

Writing with feeling is an integral part of my life. Inquiring is of a different order: it means making an effort to discover new words and new concepts that inspire and interrupt the flow of my thinking, that create new meanings. Inquiring takes time and effort. It requires a questioning approach, and challenging what I think and what I do. At the beginning of this inquiry I had no questions, just embodied feelings of great dissatisfaction, so I started reading to see if I could find challenging questions that resonated with those bodily sensations.

Yoga is based on the teachings of Patanjali, the Hindu philosophy within which my meditation technique is also situated. In *Light on Life*, Iyengar (2005) writes, 'To a yogi the body is a laboratory for life, a field of experimentation and field for research' (p. 22). My heart and mind resonate with my own embodied understanding of the truth contained in those words. My feeling-response urges me to leave the reading and start practicing the yoga asanas immediately. Yes: the body and mind are linked! A flexible body can maintain a flexible mind more easily, and this leads me to three questions:

- How can I keep my body and mind body flexible?
- How much more new stuff can the body learn as it gets older?

- What is the relation between an older body and an older mind?

Then I read, 'On the Modern Cult of Factish Gods' (Latour, 2011). In the London Review of Books a reviewer wrote:

Throughout the book, sophisticated actor-network accounts of scientific knowledge are tied together with compelling explorations of religious experience to yield a singular, symmetrical anthropotheology... Gods and facts are not autonomous: they are constructed. Not out of thin air, mere words or wishes, but by collectives using materials and instruments in the context of particular practices: these are what establish and sustain the truth and reality of gods and facts. (Herrnstein Smith, 2012)

I discover that Latour (2011) takes a very different approach to the science/religion debate. He rejects the prominence given to the subjective/objective and doesn't see any significance in the polarization of immanence (God within) and transcendence (God above and beyond everything). Instead he distinguishes between what is 'close' and what is 'far away'. Lovers' talk and religious talk is 'close', and scientific reasoning and outcomes are 'far away'.

Latour points out how banal the words of lovers' talk can sound to an onlooker, and how meaningful and easy it is for those in love to discern the truth or otherwise of the words. In the same way if the listener is not receptive to religious talk, then the words are received as banal and stupid.

He maintains that belief is immanence, and can only be seen from the 'inside', from close up, and that whilst we take scientific knowledge on trust, we cannot 'see' it and prove it for ourselves because it is 'far away'. 'If there is such a thing as belief at all, it is the most complex, sophisticated, critical, subtle reflective activity there is' (p. 42).

Latour (ibid.) also suggests that belief is:

.... patterned after a false idea of science as if it were possible to raise the question, 'Do you believe in God?' in the same way as, 'Do you believe in global warming?' except the first question does not possess any of the instruments that would allow the reference to move on, and the second is leading the interlocutor to a phenomenon even more invisible to the naked eye than God. (p. 121)

I respond by laughing out loud. Brilliant!

By differentiating between the 'closeness' of knowledge and 'far-away' knowledge, Latour distinguishes between 'trans-formation talk' that can only be understood in the present, and 'in-formation talk' that passes on facts that cannot be immediately verifiable. The latter is a process that looks outward, whereas talk between lovers is very near and can only be understood in the present and through presence. The 'closeness' of these words means that, 'when they are uttered, something happens: a slight displacement in the normal pace of things, a tiny shift in the passage of time' (p. 102).

And I write in response:

This tiny shift in the passage of time; is this in some way equivalent to the 'gap' I create by stretching the numb parts of the body in the asanas? Is this focus an embodied equivalent to the trans-formation talk that also creates space and shifts thinking? (E. Lohr, Personal communication, August 8, 2012)

And so my next questions are framed:

- What did this mean for my practice then?
- What does this mean for me now?

2013: Relational Epistemology: Teaching and learning

Yoga

I teach Iyengar Yoga once a week in the village where I live. Teaching is not a skill that comes naturally to me: I feel awkward, exposed, open to ridicule. It is a challenge because under pressure my default mode of communication tends to be either collaborative or managerial. That embodied, sensed, memory of love does not always remain in my awareness.

In a yoga-class the teacher does not get feedback as there is supposed to be no talking: it is a relational practice; but for the student it is an inward, mentally-silent learning, rather than a thoughtful, outward focus. The teacher's role is to teach the mechanics of the asanas, adapted to the physical capacity of the students. The tacit nature of the teaching is transferred in the tone of the voice, in the way the teacher demonstrates the inner meaning of the postures through the students' embodiment of the movement. I come to know what the students think and feel after the class, and usually I get a nice feeling. People tend to be chattier and more relaxed; then it feels as if it were a good thing to do, however difficult the preparation and the anticipation of teaching may have felt beforehand. Students make connections with each other, get to know each other.

Facilitating Retreat Days

During 2013 I began to facilitate regular yoga-retreats for a group of meditators based in Leicester. I had been leading relaxation-sessions with my daughter and some of her friends for over ten years, and they decided that they wanted to go on an 'Away Day', to do some yoga stretching, and to take time to be quiet and meditate in beautiful surroundings.

At that first Retreat in May 2013, there were four participants, all of whom I knew, and who knew me. It was an experimental day, a test of the venue. The programme started with yoga in the morning, then a walk after lunch, and meditation at the end of the day. I made no notes prior to the day, but kept a record of the feedback, and made a note to myself of what might be done differently in future:

The feedback:

This day out reminded me it doesn't take much to make me feel positive again and I should take time for nature and meditation every day. I am feeling very reflective about my childhood with all the family stuff going on at the moment.

Well I had a fabulous and magical day at Launde Abbey. My favourite bit was the yoga because I am slightly obsessed at the moment and am keen to improve, so your feedback was extremely useful and not something I would ordinarily get in my classes 'cos of the number of people and it is not Iyengar. (Personal communications, May 17, 2013)

Since that first exploratory day we have held Retreat Days twice a year whenever there has been a room available. The programme continues to be adjusted depending on the theme chosen by participants, and the feedback received. By 2015 the number of participants had grown to include participants from London, and amazingly also from Belgium!



Image 1. Retreat: November 2013



Image 2. It's all hilarious!

Setting the programme takes time, thought and care, but on the day itself I become a part of an unfolding process. I do not share as a participant, but neither am I set apart. I watch with love, and notice carefully how the day unfolds.

Learning and then Teaching

Teaching with integrity means practicing and developing one's own practice so that this continued learning is transferred to the class. It is an ongoing process of both attending class as a student and being a teacher. Iyengar yoga teachers must attend ongoing professional development, which means attending classes and workshops run by senior teachers.

In the autumn of 2013 I started to attend a yoga-class (as a student) taught by a senior teacher. I find the way he teaches begins to influence my thinking and my approach to my own teaching. By the end of the year I began to think that even at 69 years old and with a body like mine, successfully taking a further teaching qualification was entirely possible.

This is not easy in Iyengar yoga. To move to the next level, the teacher is required to demonstrate, as well as teach, a series of physically-challenging asanas. Many of these postures I have never been able to perform. So although it seemed a little ambitious, by January 2014 I had set myself a programme of personal practice, aiming slowly to build in the more complex and physically-demanding postures with a view to taking a further teaching-assessment in 2016.

2014: Language and symbolism: Moving my (o)ntological understanding into teaching

Meditation Experience

In this paper I do not describe my experience of being in a meditative state because it has a meaning that goes beyond the language of ordinary experience. Following Latour (2011) my (o)ntological experience is knowledge that is 'close' and will not necessarily 'make sense' to readers whose knowledge is more likely to be 'far away'. Wilber, Engler and Brown (1986) write:

Meditation may be conceptualised as a process of attentional restructuring wherein the mind can be retrained both in concentration, the ability to rest undisturbed on a single object, and in mindfulness, the ability to observe its own moment-to-moment nature, to pay attention undistractedly to a series of changing objects. (p.58)

Meditation is the basis of my personal practice and is the anchor around which I live. The contradictory relation between my struggles in my personal practice and my teaching-practice brought other questions, 'How am I continuing to develop and learn as I get older?' and, 'How is it possible for me to teach yoga and meditation with integrity when there are so many contradictions in my personal practice?'

Meditation brings 'intuitive' knowledge arising outside the perception of time and space. Any recognition of the experience brings it into time and space, and then is no longer meditation. Looking more deeply into the connections that are made between self and other, wondering how the tacit becomes manifest, and how this in turn might reframe the social contexts in which the practice happens, I turned to Bernstein's ideas about the symbolic ways in which identity is formed. In the context of teaching in schools, he makes a distinction between the transmission of skills and the transmission of values and he goes on to collapse the distinction between competence and morals, suggesting that a pedagogic discourse:

... is the principle by which other discourses are appropriated and brought into special relationship with each other (p. 32). In this way Bernstein maintains that pedagogic discourse redefines and transforms the ideological field in which practice takes place. He calls pedagogic discourse 'a recontextualising principle' (p. 33). This is how I made the epistemological connection between 'being' and 'action': and how my embodied sense of love can be brought into practice; it is through a 'pedagogy of presence': love as a creator, as the key to developing a different perception. (Lohr, 2006, pp. 32-33)

The inherent contradiction remains: that the nature of intuitive knowledge, which I know to be universal, and the need to also respect the uniquely individual beliefs and knowledge of others, must be constantly negotiated in the present moment. I refer to this as

'the discursive gap' (Lohr, 2006).

It is this gap that I maintain can be crossed by loving presence, not only in an organisational context but also in teaching yoga and meditation. Here language can – and in my view should – be used to support the context. I often lack the courage and the words to push the boundaries of language beyond the secular and into the transcendent because I am constantly aware that others have different boundaries, unique belief systems and emotional needs that I must – and want to – respect. At the same time I know that in a state of 'silent beingness' minds become joined and can bring a person great benefit.

I start reading again, looking for ways of shifting my perspective. Reading the following passage, where Rowan Williams is discussing the paradoxical nature of the parables in the Old Testament, I began to remind myself yet again that this inquiry is, in part at least, motivated by my disgust at a constant repetition of self-talk replicated in my journal, but that this might not be entirely reprehensible.

Williams (2014) maintains that silence between words allows something to emerge that is more than the speaking mind's 'normal content'. He also writes that if language is used poetically rather than employing logic, then 'the context needs to be very carefully drawn' (p. 176). In his Chapter entitled 'Language in Extreme situations', he writes:

... as with the gospel parables, we are dealing with presentations to be absorbed or apprehended as and **only** as they prompt new ways of 'going on'; new modes of action that will somehow be more transparent to the divine love and intelligence. And the very **embarrassment** of such extreme or inappropriate analogies is part of what does this prompting.... the sense of sharp incongruity between where we want to 'get to' on representing the sacred and absurdity or moral murkiness of what we find ourselves saying and hearing at stages along the way. (p. 150)

I comfort myself with these ideas; perhaps being stuck in repetition might be a useful way, a good place, from which to move forward. I begin to understand that my embodied knowing needs to be actively supplemented by deliberately replacing the words in my head with other words.

These two academics, Bernstein and Williams, are writing about language and symbolic transmission from very different perspectives. One is a Marxist, the other a theologian, but both highlight the need to create context to support meaning. For Williams the context supports the quality of the silence between words, and in Bernstein's case the symbolic nature of pedagogic discourse creates the recontextualising principle.

Teaching yoga: symbolism of the body

I realise that I automatically create context, using the symbolism of the body to point towards the transcendent, that place of experience beyond language; and I can focus a little more on this. Similarly the context for the Day Retreats is in part created by the ambience of the Abbey and the quality of peace that permeates the physical place. I also begin to think I

may be avoiding the real issue: that I need to become more aware of how I use language.

During 2014 I find the courage to risk starting the yoga-class slightly differently, to apply some of my learning in the Letchworth class where we sing an invocation to Patanjali in Sanskrit. I introduce the 'Aum' at the beginning of the yoga-class I teach and it works well: it quietyens people down. No one laughs or takes offence at the strangeness of the practice.

(See 'Teaching Aum' at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53PvL4xzVyl>).

This is what one of my yoga students wrote to me about her experience in class: 'On the way the skill is passed on, i.e. the process, I think this is a strength of yours. You start the class in a disciplined, serene way, and set the tone for the whole session.' (E. Lohr, personal communication, April, 2016)

Language: creating a context for meditation

The additional yoga practice that I had undertaken in 2013-14 was too much for my body and during 2014 I began to have problems with my lower back. This necessitated a change in the way I taught. This change of teaching technique in the yoga-class has been an interesting and educative experience. Instead of teaching from an embodied sense, speaking as I move and demonstrate the posture, it is necessary now to speak without demonstrating, and as a consequence I find I need to think more clearly. I then noticed that this began to influence the way that I used language in the meditation group:

Last Friday, driving up to Leicester in yet another grumpy and resistant mode, I did not have a clue about how to speak to 'relaxing and letting go'. When I left the house I was hurriedly reading Blake Morrison poems, threw the book back on the table and grabbed instead a page of M's writing I had been reading during the week.

Driving to Leicester the thought of the group, the thought of the reading wafted around my head. Getting to Leicester I felt less resistant and as always, glad to see (my daughter) Suzie.

Come the relaxation I found I was able to not only incorporate phrases from the reading, but linked it to how we released (physically) and to the earlier reading brought by a member of the group. The relaxation imagery brought us all to a deeper sense of ourselves – apart from one person who got a terrible cough and had to leave the room! (E. Lohr, personal communication, September 13, 2014)

So the next step to improve my teaching practice is to read and use language not only as part of my personal discipline, but as a way of getting ready to speak out. My challenge is not to speak from the rational but from the depth of my embodied sensing, which gathers together the revelatory knowledge gained through spiritual discipline. This is where I am vulnerable, where I know others will not necessarily want – or be able – to follow the words to a place of shared understanding, and I think why should they? We are all unique and I do not assume that people of different beliefs and character will be able to 'hear' these words without opposition, fear, hurt or amusement.

2015: Legacy

Every week a group of people, committed to meditation and to the techniques and practices taught by M, would meet, and the language, as well as the practice, was always focused on the transcendent. It made the possibility of becoming a more joyful and loving person a reality. Between the weekly sessions, my thoughts remained focused around M's words, and during the following week my actions, reading and meditating were imbued with that sense of possibility. As he got older M would say how disappointed he was with the lack of spiritual progress of members of the group. He became increasingly frail and died in 2013.

M often used the term 'legacy' and talked about passing on knowledge but always added that this knowledge, in the form of 'realisation', could only occur if the teacher was sufficiently spiritually developed. This means, in Bernstein's language, that the quality of the pedagogic transmission was paramount and integral to the teaching of the practices.

Before he died, M said that none of our group had reached that stage of spiritual development which would enable his legacy to be passed on, and the organisation – such as it was – split in half. At the time I interpreted 'legacy' in this context as becoming like M! I continue to carry these contradictions, feeling burdened, continuing to look back, evaluating what was good and what was difficult in those days when M was alive.

As the events of 2013 unfolded, the ability to remain quiet and attentive in my meditation and yoga practice became more problematic. Avoiding the inner sense of discontent by 'acting and doing' is easy enough; noticing and 'sitting' with the discontent in meditation is a challenge.

Waking from sleep at 4am, tossing and turning, fearful and repetitive thoughts abounding. At 5.30am I reach for my journal and write:

What I am really afraid of: to have failed to live what I call an 'authentic life' so that I die still feeling unloved, unkind, ungenerous, in pain; regretting all the opportunities that I have let slip passed through my fingers? (E. Lohr, personal communication, August 17, 2015)

What I mean by 'authenticity' is the fully-lived experience that is made possible through the practice of the higher stages of meditation. I wanted to understand more about the meaning of 'legacy' and turned to action research writings. I read:

A 'living legacy' is the unique testimony of an individual practitioner providing a positive bridge between the past and the future. As I see it, within each one of us, is realised the sum of our past academic, professional and personal knowledge. (Forester, 2012, p. 6)

This meaning arises from Catherine Forester's action inquiry but I feel so burdened by M's legacy that the idea of wanting to pass on anything of the kind horrifies me. However as I get older I realise that it will not always be possible to travel to Leicester every month and organise a retreat every six months, and that steps need to be taken to ensure that the

Leicester group becomes self-supporting in some way. The source of my intention comes back to me, and reminds me of 'fostering growth' (Ruddick, 1989) and 'growth in connection' (Fletcher, 2001).

Rereading my thesis I am reminded of the transformatory nature of love, and the ideas about organisational development in social-housing agencies that became a key part of my inquiry in 2006. When I teach I have this sense of wanting to 'foster growth'.

Ruddick (1989) said that to foster growth:

... is to nurture a child's developing spirit I mean by 'development' something closer to the dictionary meaning: to develop is.... 'to form or expand by a process of growth', 'to evolve the possibilities or power'. (p. 82)

Fletcher expanded on Ruddick's ideas about nurturing and mothering to develop a relational theory, describing how women work in organisations by making connections that are necessary to complete projects, but which are unseen and unrecognised and not acknowledged within organisational discourse.

In a similar way, my aim now is to transfer parts of the role I currently fulfil in the Leicester group to various – and eventually to all – members of the group so that they cease to rely on my role as an outsider to bring people together and meditate. Hopefully these skills of bringing prayers and poems, creating visual images of relaxation, and teaching yoga can be gently nurtured and transferred and brought into the group in a relational, connected way, which, whilst changing relationships, does not cause disruption.

I do not see this process as my 'living legacy... providing a positive bridge between the past and the future', so much as a nurturing process, an acknowledgment of the wisdom that already exists within the group and a natural process of fostering growth and development. I hope that perhaps some sense of this can be seen in this video: 'Launching Harmonious Hub' at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPhvl7Poaso>

Reflection

Critical subjectivity

Part of the problem that my examiners had with the first draft of my thesis was that it lacked critical subjectivity, the implication being that if critical subjectivity means standing aside and viewing first-person experience from an objective position, it can produce a robust argument, but that to take a position of writing whilst being 'absorbed in love' was so mindlessly emotional and therefore so solipsistic it would lack any intellectual robustness or relevance within the academy. And so the rewrite of my thesis used the original material not only wrapped around with full explanations but also re-ordered in a sequentially acceptable way.

Kegan (1994) follows Wilbur (1995) by posing models of human development as linear progressions. Wilbur's model puts the 'emotion' stage at level 8 and 'vision-logic' or

spiritual enlightenment at its pinnacle at level 13. To be fair, Wilbur says his model is not linear or euro-centric, but it does both reflect, and at the same time influence, the traditional values that continue to be promulgated within the academy.

I have always taken a different view, inquiring with deep feeling, always hoping to discover more about what it means to have an internal spiritual life that is also full of contradictions, and a teaching practice where my intention is to pass on only that which is good. I take hope from Jack Kornfield (2000):

Perfect enlightenment appears in many texts, but amid all the Western masters and teachers I know, such utter perfection is not apparent. Times of great wisdom, deep compassion, and a real knowing of freedom alternate with periods of fear, confusion, neurosis and struggle. (p. xix)

The last few years have been particularly challenging. Reading, rereading and rewriting, speaking to the computer have become my ways of making meaning, understanding myself and my motives more clearly; they have given me the capacity to understand better how becoming an 'instrument of love's purpose' relies on my emotional stability. I knew that already, but now I understand it more clearly. I can also see how the 'burden' of M's legacy, which hangs so heavily around me, is an emotional burden of my own making, which is compiled and confirmed by my own deeply-held patterns.

Models of human development

One of my deepest fears is to be labeled an evangelist or a religious fundamentalist of any kind. I do not think that I have very many fixed beliefs. I don't know how to answer the question, 'Are you a Christian?' or 'Are you religious?' I am both but my understanding of theology is not bound by dogma. I think I believe in what Rowan Williams calls 'a natural theology' (Williams, 2014); but even putting my experience into words can cause problems: words have cultural signposts and can be solipsistic and easily offend. And anyway, I am more Hindu than Christian, and on the other hand I think it's best to avoid mentioning that concept usually referred to as 'God' in a society peopled by secular fundamentalists.

Models and schema of human development proposed by Wilbur (1995), Kegan (1994) and Torbert (1991, 2001) are tied into a scientific paradigm that can become as restrictive and as defensible as any other dogma, whereas both Eaton (2005) and Iyengar (2005) use symbolism to describe the relation of the material world to the noumenal, just as in the same way poetry connects and evokes the deeper dimensions of experience. My urge to inquire is fed by my need to find words to write my experience, to learn from that writing and then to bring that learning into my action. I fall into neo-managerial ways of speaking: when I need to propose or defend an argument that is supposed to be value-free and not 'outcome-dependent' my brain freezes.

However, as a teacher, I need to create contexts in which meaningful silences can occur. Whilst I think that theological language is not appropriate, when I teach yoga I use the symbolism of the body to reach over that 'primordial gap'. However, that does not

necessarily suit everyone, and so perhaps I need to be reading more poetry, poetry that speaks about the universality of the human condition.

Getting older

The joy of the yoga asanas is in the act of stretching. It is an embodied sensation, and the better able a person is to understand the movement, the more space is created in the mind. In this way the body comes to symbolise that primordial gap, that silence which has no name or form. This is what Iyengar (2005) means when he writes ‘the body is a laboratory for life’.

The frequent practicing of the more complex yoga postures caused potentially serious damage to my spine. This had unexpectedly beneficial consequences for my teaching. I have become wiser: the exercises needed to strengthen the core muscles of the spine were not only interesting, but informed the yoga teaching and I now understand better how to protect my students from hurting themselves. The very subtle, daily osteopathic exercises that I would previously have thought too easy have actually been challenging. Now after ten months of practice the shape of my spine is beginning to change. There is still much work to be done, and I get a lot of soreness in the back of the body as the years of habit shift slowly. This has had an effect on how I consider my students’ needs.

In the Viva, my examiners suggested that critical subjectivity was essential within the academy, saying that, ‘without a sense of the being an impersonal third... I can’t link to anything’. They went on to maintain that a first-person inquiry could only be considered valid within the academy if the self were treated as an object (p. 316). I could not countenance the idea of being an ‘impersonal third’, either whilst in the moment, or reflexively afterwards; instead I made an alternative case for an embodied sense of love, which could influence my thought-processes in the moment and could then be carried into my speech and action.

But now I have found that the process of deciding how I use my energy does involve an element of critical subjectivity. Developing a sense of being the ‘impersonal third’ has become part of a deliberate thought-process when planning how and what to teach, which involves assessing the needs of younger bodies whilst working very differently with my own body. This has happened over the past twelve months, as what I teach in practice has, of necessity, differed in significant ways from my own yoga-practice. This does not alter the embodied, sensed memory of love that remains unconditionally and uncritically at the core of my being and which I seek to transfer symbolically as a ‘pedagogy of loving presence’; but now I am making a clearer distinction between what Bernstein (2000) refers to as ‘the transmission of skills’ and the ‘transmission of values’.

Philosophy and (O)ntology

When I am teaching, I ‘instruct’ students how to move their bodies. The gross movements are roughly the same for each asana, but to develop a deeper understanding of

their own bodies I now plan the programme around using smaller, more subtle muscles that are contained within the gross movement. When someone 'gets' it I sometimes know by the smile that lights up the face, or the 'Ah' sound that is made. I understand this is an expression of an inner realization. It looks to an outsider like 'a slight displacement in the normal pace of things, a tiny shift in the passage of time' (Latour, 2011 p. 102). This inner opening cannot be explained and cannot be manipulated, it just happens.

This is what I hope will happen for every student who comes to class. It happens 'close up' (ibid.) and cannot be proved. All I know is that it happens in me, and that it can happen in other people, that 'getting it' is neither a question of belief nor a question that needs to be explained. It is the process of moving that internal sense of 'getting it' into the socially constructed world around that becomes the next step.

When I teach yoga, I want to imbue a sense of openness and capacity for infinite learning by the way I teach. When asked for feedback, this is what two of the students have written about their experiences:

Excerpt from 'text' conversation:

GB: 'Educational influence?' No idea what that actually means, but using my imagination I would say that you demonstrate with patience, calmness, good humour and kindness which I now associate with the practice of yoga. More pragmatically, beyond the class room I often hear your instructions in my head and adjust my deportment accordingly.

Me: Does the meditation we do have any day-to-day impact?

GB: Definitely has had a positive effect as it shows me somewhere peaceful and non-judgmental to go to in my mind, away from the chattering analytical brain. Hope this helps, it certainly helps me! (GB, personal communication, April 2016)

And here is an email:

If I don't make it to yoga, my world doesn't feel quite as it should and when there is a break, I look forward to it resuming. I love doing Iyengar yoga, albeit only in a class situation, and I love doing it with Eleanor. I have gone to Eleanor's classes for some years now, and have done Iyengar yoga intermittently for 30 years or so.

From the simple joy of stretching and the pleasure I can feel in some of the postures, to a grumpy discomfort when I feel unable to stretch forward in the sitting postures, or don't want to arch my back or stretch my thigh muscles any more, it all feels worth it. I most appreciate that Eleanor brings an intelligence to the postures and to her choice of sequence of postures. And as a response, I have something tangible to build on, to understand better what a posture is asking for, and I have glimpses of how I am doing in relation to that. I can learn this way and be on what feels like a solid path. I don't know how she does it, but she seems to know exactly the minutiae of what the body needs to do, to attempt to meet what each posture is asking for, and how to articulate this to the class. I enjoy this connecting with my body and feeling it more integrated with my mind and so to the whole of me.

I think she's a really good teacher and that we're lucky to have her. I feel in safe hands too. I appreciate her responsiveness to the needs of each of us and to the group in her class planning – she gives a huge amount to each of us. She is very conscientious.

She can also get outspokenly cross and quite controlling if she feels that someone is not behaving as they should or if there's too much disruption, all ultimately with a fair sprinkling of good humour. It feels rooted in the fact that she cares enormously about the sanctity of yoga, and in her wish to benefit the class. I have burst in to tears on a couple of occasions when I was already feeling fragile, only to find that added to this I felt rather humiliated and misunderstood.

I imagine Eleanor thinks of her teaching as part of her spiritual practice and as a group we benefit from the holding that this intention brings. The quietness, 'Oms' and gratitude in the regular start to the sessions, I find very helpful, in orienting myself to a deeper level of connection. If I can sustain this in the postures, it's truly marvelous, though more often than not, I find the physical exertions take away from that. I would say that I am not familiar with feeling or identifying my own spirituality in my physical self or in physical activity, but I do recognize that yoga can help towards unifying the two, especially when the teacher, as with Eleanor, offers this intention.

I go home feeling stronger in the spine, sometimes as if I have been through a washing machine or wondering what on earth is happening to my body. Sometimes it releases some uncomfortable emotion over the following couple of days and can take a while to integrate. It isn't always easy to return to the working day, but I always feel that my body has enjoyed it and I am grateful.

Thank you Eleanor. (CLR, personal communication, May, 2016)

What have I Learned?

This inquiry has shown me that when things are 'not feeling right', and even though aging will present a range of unwelcome and unwanted challenges, if I continue to write, to seek inspiration and to explain and look for that 'slight displacement in the normal pace of things', my life and my teaching will remain alive and congruent with an embodied sense of love. I have been reminded that small shifts in perception are capable of generating educational knowledge not only for me but also for others. By continuing to develop my living-theory-methodology I have clarified what really matters to me now, and through the peer-review process I have come to understand more clearly why I teach.

And what do I want to know more about?

During the peer review process I was asked:

- How do you make your embodied sense memory of love remain in your awareness?
- I often wonder in relation to the people I work with...how deep is the connection they are establishing? Knowing that would help me adjust my work accordingly.

- In what ways are your embodied sense of love and your pedagogy of presence influencing this sharing process?
- How is your teaching and learning being influenced by your participants?

I do not have a response – yet. These questions excite me, and alongside thinking about influence, my students, their learning and their relationships with each other, I have been inspired by the EJOLTS community to write more broadly, not just about teaching but about how I might improve living love more fully in the other work that I do.

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