

PERSPECTIVES – News and Comments^{1,1}

Marilynne Robinson and My Mother: Phenomenological Reflections on Endings in Parenting and Teaching

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Abstract

Parenting and teaching are relational acts; the relationship between a parent and child, a teacher and student—this is fertile ground, and some of our most meaningful and foundational experiences stem from these connections (van Manen, 2016). This paper aims to examine one such experience through a methodological lens that puts curriculum theory into conversation with the phenomenological (Rafferty, 2011): specifically, the lived-experience of children leaving, of the endings that are inevitably bound up with the practices of parenting and teaching. Reflecting upon our experiences as children and students might enrich our present-day practice as parents and teachers (Dewey, 1938/1997; Pinar, 1975); stemming from this, a phenomenological interview I conducted with my mother guides this paper, and my own experiences as a child and student are also brought to bear. This paper concludes with suggestions that diverge in two directions: (1) what an attunement to the phenomenon of children leaving might offer our practice as teachers, and (2) how this type of reflective and intentional self-analysis—a sort of qualitative research that is reflexive and open—might allow our work as parents and teachers to flourish in new and previously undisclosed ways.

Keywords: homeschooling, ending, children leaving, phenomenology, curriculum theory

At the very root of me I know this; I know this!
What a broad world to roam in, what a sea to swim in.
So I begin with the end in mind.
—Norma Jean, *Disconnectie* (Brandan, 2005)

As I type these words, making final edits on this paper on *endings* in parenting and teaching, I am preparing to say goodbye to my students, future social studies teachers I have taught for almost two years in an undergraduate teacher education program. While their questions, desires, and anxieties about teaching have shifted, they are still nervous, unsure of what they've *actually* learned; this absence of some *thing* they can point to or grab hold of to demonstrate their growth is bothersome. It runs contrary to a professional culture built on credentials and marketable skills. Indeed, it seems this practice called teaching is tricky to pin down to a list of skills or maneuvers, a slippery fact that becomes all the more obvious as a particular ending approaches—the conclusion of one's teacher education (Britzman, 2003).

My mom knows this well; she homeschooled my siblings and me for 15 years and even now, as we talked about the end of her time as our teacher, she wasn't sure she "...ever really had a hold on it...on teaching" She said,

When I look back, now that it's done, I have a lot of regrets. Emotionally, I didn't have the patience I would have liked, and some of this is personal; we all have our own baggage, but I'm still not sure there was a time I felt like I had it mastered, so while I'm proud of you guys there's still a sense I could have...maybe...done better?

These paradoxes of what it means *to learn how to teach* clash with contemporary demands for measurable learning outcomes and teacher preparation programs saturated with data. It is a collision between neoliberal education policies and what Freud called an impossible profession, the maddening, interminable nature of education (Britzman, 1998; Felman, 1982). As a teacher educator and doctoral candidate in my 10th year of teaching, it's easy to say I've learned a lot about my own practice as a teacher, but perhaps it's more accurate—albeit less

¹ The "Perspectives – News and Comments" section of this journal consists of articles that are not considered "peer-reviewed."

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flattering—to say I’ve become more adjusted to the frustrations and second-guessing attached to endings in teaching. It’s an amalgam of feelings we resist against through various professional compulsions—emphases on harmony and closure, mastery and a willful ignorance of the uncertainty of the future.

I offer this paper as an attempt to grapple with some of these endings that are attached to teaching and parenting. While I am not a parent, my mom’s lived experience as a homeschooling parent is brought to bear in this paper; it was the initial inspiration for this creative attempt to trace some of the through lines between teaching and parenting. And perhaps I am especially susceptible to nostalgia, acutely aware of the permanence that is a latent presence within those final goodbyes on the last day of school. Regardless, my interest in these conclusions stems from my own everyday practices as a researcher and as a teacher educator, and I offer this paper as one small attempt to reflect on this phenomenon, hopeful that such reflections might lead us towards better relations as teachers, parents, and students.

Introduction

I REMEMBER THE cardboard boxes in the hallway, so full of books they were splitting—*The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* (Avi, 2001/1991) and *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (O’Dell, 2010/1960), a set of soft-cover U.S. history textbooks, a dated chemistry kit perched on top—my mom was donating the hundreds of books she had used to homeschool us.

I was back in my parents’ home for the winter holidays and it was a late-December afternoon; the light was a floating yellow, the vanguard of an approaching dusk. I felt a heavy melancholy in the presence of the books as I sat and rummaged, flipping through yellowed editions of *Winning His Spurs* (Henty, 1882/2017), *Johnny Tremain* (Forbes, 1967/1971), and *The Flames of Rome* (Maier, 1981), and rereading the simple sentences that had held such power over me. My brother and I would have been sprawled on this same carpet 20 years before—constantly fidgeting and imagining—while my mother theatrically voiced Claudius and Nero and Seneca as we envisioned the early Christians in the Coliseum and formed our first ideas about the world and the Others out there in it.

For me, the books were envoys from an extinguished universe, a shrinking collection of artifacts from a past-life. The books were a reminder of those endless mid-mornings and dark afternoons in the deep cold of Maine, a house filled with 3 children and their mother. There are six of us now, but my brother and I were off at college for the majority of my parents’ “2nd round”—my three youngest siblings, all adopted, were homeschooled for varying amounts of time. In all, my mom homeschooled for 15 years, and one by one we left, returning home for holidays and winter breaks to see each other, our mother—our teacher—the one who taught us to read and write, to sit quietly and think, to annotate our textbooks and to study our Bible, to always ask questions but to sometimes just listen.

Aims and Methodology

FITTINGLY, THEN, THIS paper might be thought of as one by-product of this style of quiet listening and close-reading, a

reflection of my deep interest in how my own present-day attitude and orientation towards my work as a teacher is always bending back, drawing upon my mother’s work as a homeschooling parent and teacher, an experiential cycle that is at once impossible to escape and under-theorized (Grumet, 1978).

My aim, then, points in two complementary directions; First, this paper explores the lived experience of *children leaving*, a phenomenon that blurs the boundaries between parenting and teaching—just as children grow and leave the home, so do they move *in* and then *out* of the lives of their classmates and teachers. The essences of this phenomenon differ according to parenting or teaching, but my purpose in this creative conflation is both interpretive and pragmatic: in an interpretive sense, explorations of lived experience might glimpse the entirety of the world in a moment or scene, a gesture or anecdote (van Manen, 2016, p. 36). Such disclosures render the borders between parenting and teaching instructively porous; perhaps an approach that is constituted by this style of irreverent crisscrossing moves us closer to what Merleau-Ponty (1962) called “re-learning” (p. viii), a re-calibration of how we see the world around us.

For example, how might an investigation into the lived experience of *children leaving* re-awaken us to ways of being-in-the-world that have become otherwise become dulled, evaded, or forgotten? In a pragmatic sense, my mom’s subject-position as a homeschooling parent is inherently challenging, a bizarre and useful affront to arbitrary demarcations between parenting and teaching. In short, my creative conflation is driven by a summative hunch; perhaps teachers might flourish more as teachers if they glimpsed the phenomenal connections between teaching and parenting. Conversely, might parents flourish as parents if the same through lines were disclosed and highlighted?

Second, this confluence of the phenomenological with the work of teaching and learning situates this paper within curriculum theory, a field Pinar (2004) defines as “the interdisciplinary study of educational experience” (p. 2). And yet, it is exceedingly rare for teachers or students to have *an* experience (Dewey, 1934/2005) in today’s schools (Pinar, 2004). Decades of school reforms have codified curricula and stressed a “bottom line” in education determined through standardized test scores. Classrooms are unaesthetic spaces; they deaden and lull to sleep, while teachers, under pressure from politicians to produce certain metrics (Pinar, 2004), attempt to control and separate the vibrant emotional and psychological lives of students from the very serious job of mastering particular objectives and scoring well on very important tests (Nelson, 2019; Pinar, 2004). Indeed, the most dynamic and lively components of children are rendered as “distractions” in today’s version of schooling; dreams and fantasies, imaginations and desires—they have no place in classrooms.

In short, school sucks (Greenwalt, 2016; Snaza, 2016; Stovall, 2016), and this painful summation brings us back to the field of curriculum theory. Because educational experiences have become so rote and predictable, the field of curriculum theory is provided with a subversive capacity—if the experiences of children in school are barren, how might we imagine better ways of teaching and learning?

Reflections on Endings in Parenting and Teaching

This paper aims to participate in this method of experimental imagining, a style of curriculum theory that is “simultaneously autobiographical and political” (Pinar, 2004, p. 4); on the one hand, this method allows us to recognize the ways in which our lived experiences are brought to bear in our practice as parents and teachers (Rafferty, 2011). As a curriculum theorist and teacher-educator, I am aiming to play with a form of *currere* (Pinar, 1975), one that might allow small icons or glimmers of recognition in singular experiences to shed light on alternative pathways in parenting and teaching (van Manen, 2016). On the other hand, my reflections and analysis carry political weight; they are shot-through with implications for *praxis*, not only for my own practice as a teacher-educator but for our community of parents and teachers, how we attend to and perhaps re-learn our responsibilities to the children we parent and teach (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Importantly, *currere* is inherently sociopolitical and critical. Its attention to the subjective, lived-experiences of teachers and students and the social milieu in which those experiences took place—the sexual, racial, economic and political affects at work (Berlant, 2011; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 2004)—provides a space for suggestions and disclosures, an openness to alternative ways of experiencing education and being-in-the-world (Heidegger, Stambaugh, & Schmidt, 2010; Pinar, 2004).

Finally, I find it worth mentioning that this paper’s methodology is, in some sense, a return to forms of qualitative inquiry that now feel weirdly modern and a bit out of whack. My semblance of faith in lived, human experience—a belief in its pedagogical potential and its affective capacity to move and compel—works against the core sensibilities of the “posts” that are in vogue. Methods like post-qualitative inquiry are wary of language and voice, the mediums through which human experiences are most often shared (St. Pierre, 2008), and many projects are moving towards the promise of non-representation (Thrift, 2008).

Perhaps Britzman (2000) provides an instructive middle ground. Her theorization of the uncanny (im)possibility of carrying out poststructural ethnographic research highlights similar difficulties, this problem with the instability of the subject, but Britzman seems to be more willing to stay with the trouble. For Britzman, the inevitable incompleteness of experience is itself worth investigating and working through, and I argue this way forward echoes van Manen’s (2016) reminder that “every telling is constrained, partial, and determined by the discourses and histories that prefigure, even as they might promise, representation” (p. 127). In this sense, the interview I conducted with my mom is just that, an ever-partial attempt to capture the elusive and unstable, an experience that, while incomplete, rings true with just that—the powerful telling of something lived.

Marilynne Robinson and My Mom

MY MOM AND I spoke on a frigid afternoon in February; it was growing dark and large flakes of snow were falling outside the window of my study. I sat in my wooden chair with a cup of

coffee, an audio-recorder, a notebook, and my phone. I had one question written at the top of a blank sheet of notebook paper: “Mom, can you tell me a little bit about what it was like for homeschooling to come to an end...to conclude our education, your time as our teacher, and then for us to leave at the same time?”

For my mom, making sense of our leaving, of the end of teaching and of a particular season of parenting, required a reexamination of the start, an opportunity to rearticulate her purposes and aims in deciding to homeschool us 20 years before. It all started with a love of learning, with a vision of the adults her children might grow up to be; once this goal was clarified to me, put in its proper juxtaposition against what she was about to say, my mom described the experience of leave-taking that is most recent: the departure of my 23-year old sister Anna².

Anna is leaving now, I mean she’s left, technically [laughs], but she’s still leaving...it’s a longer process than it was with you and Matthew because we’re here in the area (Chicago) and she’s getting rid of boxes of books. For me as her former teacher and mother, I have a sense of grieving going on; she’s not valuing what I had hoped she would value...books and reading and that kind of thing, but also it could be that it’s because a lot of those books she’s getting rid of are books that are more in line with our Christian way of living and thinking.

Anna is getting rid of books and moving out of the room that was both her bedroom and her high school classroom. My mom taught Anna until she left for college—a total of 13 years—but her leaving has been different from mine, drawn out, extrapolated across a city for 4 years. I suggest the prominence of the books within this experience is crucial; my sister’s decision to sell the books is a sort of consummation of her leave-taking. The books are a physical container of sorts, swirling with memories and affects, ineffable phenomena that act upon my mother and sister in different ways. The departure of the books from the house is painful in both its finality and how it coincides with my sister’s leave-taking, but it also provides an important conclusion to this particular leaving, a distinction I find to be important. Following this, the grief my mom feels is an essence of this same phenomenon, akin to the confluence of grief and regret she mentioned next.

I mean, it was the same when you and Matthew went to college, there are these specific moments of regret—‘oh, I should have done that or I can’t believe I did this’—and I felt as though I’d failed you guys, whether in homeschooling or certain parenting decisions, but I really think this is just part of the process...of that experience of you guys leaving for college and the house and what not. I’ve felt it every time one of you has left but then those self-doubts start to go away.

I argue my mom is pointing to two essential components of the phenomenon of *children leaving*: first, a sober attention to the importance of *working through* the self-doubt that is inherent to parenting and teaching. Her grief in the moment, a reaction to Anna’s decision to part with her books, is paired with my mom’s

²All proper names are pseudonyms.

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regrets as a homeschooling parent; perhaps different pedagogical moves might have produced a different outcome—it is likely that all of us that are parents or teachers have had similar thoughts. Second, it seems the consummation of the experience of children leaving is crucial; of course, watching Anna move out and sell her books is painful, but children leaving is unavoidable, and the ways in which we navigate these endings—how we respond and cope with grief and regret—is paramount to our ability to flourish as parents and teachers.

The last day of my 1st year of teaching was in a hot 3rd-grade classroom in a K-8 parochial school on the south side of Chicago. My 27 third-graders gathered around me for a picture at the blackboard, our colorful word wall and Mr. Nelson's disciplinary levels visible behind us. I still have this picture. My students left for the summer and I was alone in my room, beginning to pack up, and I looked at the clothes pins on the discipline tracker, each pin with a student's name on it. I experienced regret in that moment, a sense of embarrassment I don't think I could have felt *before* my students left. I continue to build regrets as a teacher, but my reflection on this experience of my students leaving—my first class as a teacher having concluded—forced me to critically encounter pedagogical practices that worked against the flourishing of my students.

This is a simple but sticky example, a memory that has lingered inside me for the past 10 years. Similarly, my mom's experience of my sister leaving finds its anecdotal footing in a collection of old novels, and her communication of her experience to me is grounded in that singular moment of grief and regret. Working from Berlant's (2011) notion of cruel optimism, this makes sense—our habit of investing parts of ourselves *within* physical objects is one way we maintain footing in the world, one essence of human experience. We lend tremendous import to otherwise harmless objects—we sharpen their teeth—and, in turn, they might turn against us and harm us.

Marilynn Robinson's novel *Home* (2008) is also attentive to the affective weight of *things* in lived experience. In *Home*, my sister's books are a gleaming DeSoto; the family car is a double-edged sword—a painful symbol of leave-taking and a token of impossible hope. Robinson's novel is gorgeously slow, uninterested in rushing past the off-handed quips and unspoken salves that might linger over decades, the infectious silences that are ever-seeping and deafening in their bewildering absence. *Home* is about the unraveling of a singular faith that had every reason to be strong; it is about the unrealized prayers of a father for an absent son and the unseen goodness of an ever-faithful daughter. It is about the impossibility of unconditional love, the wonders of divine mercy and grace, and the empty bedrooms of a once-filled home.

At the start of the novel, the family DeSoto sits in an isolated state of neglect, a reminder of the many childhoods that have ended and the far-flung places those same children now reside with families of their own. When the wayward son Jack returns for the first time in two decades, he both loves and hates the car; it is a painful reminder of the countless family rides he skipped and also a practical project, one that might silence those very reminders through the greasy application of his hands.

At the same time, his father, the Reverend Boughton, has experienced all but one of his children leaving, but Jack's leave-taking is special—the old pastor can't shake it, it haunts him.

Jack left the family home pre-maturely and under particularly painful circumstances. Because of this, Jack's leaving and his return are entangled—the latter has been prayed for and expected, but importantly, not worked through because the former was so horrific. In this sense, we might think about how leaving is consummated, how important it is that these departures are attended to and worked through in ways that are life-giving. The Boughton's DeSoto then is the opposite of my sister's books; it's the unconsummated symbol of a leaving that never finished, that was never right from the start.

And yet, the longer Jack stays in his childhood home, his interest in this project of salvaging both the car and the relationship with his father grows. The family DeSoto is a primary character in Jack's dramatic attempts to carve new beginnings out of bad endings, and mid-way through the novel, Jack slowly backs the gleaming DeSoto out of the barn, a seductive "ripe plum" shining "darkly and demurely" (Robinson, 2008, p. 161). It is a breath-taking sight and his sister Glory shivers with pride. In a moving scene, the Reverend is carried out to witness Jack's handiwork, and both men are restraining themselves, hardly able to believe this moment is happening. An ending, a sundering between father and son, one that had been shut and closed beyond the realistic possibility of repair, is suddenly reopened; there is a glimmer of hope, a sense of forgiveness and harmony that only minutes before was thought to be out of reach. And the role of the DeSoto itself is particularly crucial; its symbolism exceeds capacity—it is a proxy for the words that will always remain unspoken.

Conclusion

IN THE END, Jack's leaving is carried out for a second time; he drives the DeSoto towards a newly disclosed future, one that wasn't uncovered until this second leaving. I will conclude by highlighting two implications for our work as parents and teachers, two offerings of how this exploration of children leaving might enrich our lives, our being-in-the-world with one another.

First and foremost, we must attend to our pedagogical relations, those we find ourselves *with* and *alongside* in our classrooms, in our homes, in the world. Importantly, this attendance is sober and clear-sighted; it is aware of the infinite futurities and pedagogical relations that stretch far beyond us—in this sense, it is an awareness of the leave-taking that awaits. Such an orientation is not afraid but hopeful; it is aware of the grief and regret that accompanies any relation but is also open to what that pain might show us about ourselves, how alternative ways of being might present themselves to us. In a curricular sense, this is a teaching and learning experience that prioritizes relationality, the intersubjective and unique mingling of spirit that might occur in a classroom.

As I have highlighted, such an emphasis on relationality, on slowing down, on noticing the *awesome ordinary* of everyday life in teaching and parenting—this couldn't be more opposed to the corporate, assembly-line modes of teaching and learning that have become so prevalent (Stewart, 2007). Even in parenting, entire seasons of life—middle school, high school—are increasingly by-passed through an obsession with college acceptance and the fantasies of prestige, wealth, and success that

accompany such material and reductive motivations for being in this world. This focus on the relational, then, on the now, becomes radical in this juxtaposition, it's refusal to view the pedagogical relationship—both in teaching and parenting—as transactional, as validated by the credentials awarded at the end.

Second, I suggest we ought to re-open ourselves to second-endings, the opportunity for moments of leaving that went wrong to be pried open and redeemed. A re-figuring of bad endings in parenting and teaching is where *Home* becomes so relevant to this discussion. There are no scenes of schooling or conventional pedagogy in the novel, and even the parenting relationship is referred to primarily in hindsight; the endings have come and gone—that's that. But what's powerful is its connection to my mom's first quote above; while one suggestion I'm making in this paper is a comfortability with endings that demands an attention to the relational, to the now, there is another that is concerned with the regrets that are so often attached to endings, good or bad. In the case of Reverend Boughton, then, we might see him as an exemplary pedagogue, the prodigal son's loving father—a teacher that is radically patient and open to unscheduled returns.

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Endnote

1. The “Perspectives – News and Comments” section of this journal consists of articles that have not undergone peer review. *HSR*