

Dr. David Jardine and the “Descartes Lecture”: Twenty Years of Miraculous Returns

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In 1995, I was a master’s student in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Calgary taking my first graduate nursing course in qualitative research. Our professor, Dr. Matjorie McIntyre, informed us that she had invited a professor from the Faculty of Education for a guest lecture. She had become acquainted with Dr. David Jardine’s hermeneutic endeavor through a mutual teacher and outstanding scholar, Dr. Ted Aoki.

Dr. McIntyre advised us in advance to “expect the unexpected” and that there was the potential of our worlds being shaken up over the three hours with Dr. Jardine. On the day he was to lecture, I arrived to class early to find a somewhat unconventional looking man in leather pants and bare feet, fiddling rather ineptly with the technical equipment in the room and I wondered if he was the media person who was setting up the equipment for class. Once the rest of the class arrived, Dr. McIntyre introduced this barefooted, long haired man as Dr. Jardine and turned the class over to him. For an hour and a half, we were transfixed, gently, yet almost audaciously and

sometimes boldly invited into a philosophical and historical vortex that spun us around, indeed turning our taken-for-granted and assumed worlds and understandings upside down.

Dr. Jardine began the class with the reading of the late Bronwen Wallace poem, “Appeal,” taken from her collection of poetry, *The Stubborn Particulars of Grace* (1987). He started by taking us into the ordinary, everyday world we all recognized and then he took us back through history to show how we got to where we could recognize such a thing and recognize such a thing differently. After a tracing of this history and an understanding of how, in fact, the natural and human sciences bifurcated and ended up in a place of shadows, truth, imitation, and certainty, we took a coffee break and returned to room to bring our topics to the discussion. The topics that showed up in this discussion were issues of human concern - - hermeneutics applied to the

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worlds of practice professions: nursing, social work, education, and psychology to name a few. Dr. Jardine gently cradled our topics and with the skill of a master interpreter helped us see what was beneath the obvious, what was addressing us, what we were not hearing in the “data,” and what the topic was asking of us.

He ended the class with the final poem in Wallace’s (1987, pp. 110-111) book, called “Particulars,” the last stanza of which reads:

And to say for myself, just once,
without embarrassment, *bless*,
thrown out as to some lightness
that I actually believe in,
surprised (as I believe
they were) to find it
here, where it seems impossible
that one life even matters, though
like them, I’ll argue
the stubborn argument of the particular,
right now, in the midst of things, *this*
and *this*.

I completed my PhD in 2000 (with Dr. Janice Bell as my supervisor), conducting a Gadamerian hermeneutic study, and like my contemporaries, like those students before us, and the many students to come, I was exquisitely mentored by Dr. Jardine in hermeneutic understanding, tradition, and how to conduct “good” research which did not misappropriate or betray this tradition. In 2004, I began teaching the master’s level qualitative research course in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Calgary, and in the same year, Dr. Dianne Tapp and I developed a course in Hermeneutic Phenomenology (Binding, Moules, Tapp, & Rallison, 2007). In 2010, I began teaching the doctoral level qualitative research course. In all of these three courses and in every offering of them, I have invited Dr. Jardine to attend as a visiting lecturer, using the 3 hours to offer his “Descartes Lecture”

as I have come to call it. This past winter, I asked permission to tape the lecture, had it transcribed, and suggested David submit it to the Journal of Applied Hermeneutics as an invited submission. Hundreds (if not thousands) of students across disciplines have heard this talk over time, some many times, as I have known of students who have taken David’s courses, and returned to audit them several times because of what they gain from them. With each offering of this lecture, the talk is somewhat different; something new emerges. I personally have heard it over two dozen times, and I am as transfixed every time, as much as I was the first time. This lecture is a legacy that I am proud to publish in our journal.

What happens in the second part of the class after the lecture is what is more difficult to describe and why we chose not to transcribe that part of this recent class that we recorded. The students disperse at the coffee break, heads spinning, sometimes looking like deer in headlights. They return to class after the break, with their topics of research or study trying to take hold of something, trying to find traction. It is here that we see what Wallace (1987, p. 13) wrote in *Appeals*:

As if they hoped to find
that opening in each of us
from which, long after we’d been told
what happened next, they could begin
their slower, more miraculous
returns.

The topics showed up: all the unsettling, upsetting, exuberant conversations about nurses working with children who die; domestic violence; the love of teaching children to learn to love Math; the responsibilities and decision making of nurses who work triage in emergency departments; the inescapable human dramas of aging, dementia, love, death, suffering, and joys. As each topic found its

way into the conversation, hermeneutics joined it and, as is the case with all good hermeneutic work, hermeneutics itself disappears as the topic, and the topics themselves come to light through the delicate, rigorous, and courageous work of interpretation. This is work that makes sense only in the face-to-face encounter that cannot be captured on tape or in description; it is the real work of hermeneutics. It is the miraculous return of the topic, where there really is no “method” to it. It is the arrival of understanding that happens with an acute attentiveness to the topic, and a practiced art of strengthening. The openings the students and their topics sought were portals that hermeneutics and *aletheia* offer - - an enlivening and remembering of something that was forgotten, lost, or left. There is a buoyancy in this part of the class as we realize that all of this tradition and history and oppression is, in fact, joyous, enlightening, and offers something. This second half is different every time, but there is something present that echoes Gadamer’s (1989) words:

...in deciphering and interpreting...a miracle takes place: the transformation of something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity...that is why the capacity...to understand...is like a secret art, even a magic that frees and binds us. (pp. 163-164)

Like all good magic, some things cannot be explained, or should not be explained.

Dr. Jardine came to the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary in a somewhat “roundabout” way. He completed his undergraduate degree in philosophy and religious studies in 1973 at McMaster University in Hamilton. His MA supervisor was G.B. Madison, who brought Hans-Georg Gadamer

to McMaster while David was studying there. Professor Madison had Paul Ricoeur as his supervisor in Paris. David’s PhD supervisor, Dr. Dieter Misgeld, had studied under first Gadamer and then Habermas. Dr. Jardine started at the University of Calgary in 1986. Professor Jardine has published 83 refereed journal articles, 35 book chapters, and 8 books on ecological, philosophical, hermeneutic, and Buddhist studies of various facets of educational theory and practice.

I have no doubt that Dr. David Jardine will, in time (in his lifetime, I hope) be renowned as one of the most astute and profound hermeneutic scholars and prolific writers of the past three decades. For now, I am content to proudly call David my teacher, my mentor, my colleague, and my friend.

References

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