

Invited Editorial

The Gifts of a Talk with TED

Jim C Field

Abstract

In this invited editorial, Dr. Jim Field reflects on the recent meeting of the 12th annual Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, which hosted Professor Ted George as our visiting scholar. Three days of lecture and scholarly conversation left all of us in thoughtful and interpretive spaces.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, Canadian Hermeneutic Institute, Ted George, gifts, events

“Gifts create relations that create gifts” (O’Neill, 1999)

If you have ever had the pleasure of listening to Professor Ted George talk about hermeneutics, and we did this year’s at the Canadian Hermeneutics Institute, two things become immediately apparent. The first is his depth of scholarship borne out of love—Ted radiates joy in the very act of speaking. He cannot help but smile throughout his delivery. Pleasure oozes out of Ted and fills the room. No less captivating is his skill at communicating complex ideas in such a way that they reverberate throughout one’s life. The immediacy and force of the application makes it hard to sit still, the obscurity of Martin Heidegger transformed, almost instantaneously, into the jolting clarity of Ted George. All of this is to say that the act of listening to Ted is an aesthetic event; a song arises inside. Ted’s gift is already excessive, and yet the gifting has only begun.

On the traditional lands of the *Niitsitapi*, the Blackfoot Confederacy, where the conference took place, when you hear a song like that you know something has happened. First, that you have become attuned to what is happening around you, awakened in such a way that it sings to you.

Corresponding Author:

James C. Field, PhD
Werklund School of Education, University
of Calgary
Email: jfield@ucalgary.ca

Equiprimordially, something else has happened: a place for the song to be heard *properly*, the “ethical space of engagement” (Ermine, 2007), has been created. Creation, ethical space, and song—on these lands, these too are gifts.

As remarkable as the foregoing was, there is something even more startling and deeply hermeneutic that happens. Ted practices a kind of *precarious pedagogy* (Ayres, 2021), most fitting in times like these, but not at all easy to achieve. The precarity comes forward at exactly the right moment: after Ted’s lecture, where the floor is opened for discussion, and a question is posed. Remarkably, Ted treated every question posed as a real hermeneutic question, *an event*, that, as Gadamer (1996) says “breaks open the being of the object” (p. 362). The object “broken open” in this case was Ted’s carefully crafted lecture, seamlessly delivered. That had to be tough to do, at least it would be for me—to allow what one loves to be broken open, *in public*, as a hermeneutic scholar in a room full of hermeneutic scholars. The risk is not trivial. Even as a silent witness, I could feel my own uneasiness rise. I am afraid that, if I were the expert Ted was, with his command of language and the *sache*, I would have taken the easy way out: multiply my arguments for, marshal testimony from other scholars, reassert my thesis, now made stronger through logic and scholarship. And I believe Ted could have done that, *but he did not*. Instead, he *suffered the question*. In fact, he smiled and stepped back, even joining the asker in sharpening the question, adding force to it, and further wobbling what he had asserted earlier. In doing so, Ted engaged in “the art of testing” that Gadamer so cherished, where “one really considers the weight of the other’s opinion” (p. 367). As Gadamer asserts, this also happens to be “the art of thinking...the art of conducting a real dialogue” (p. 367). Ted made it easy for all of us to join in—*invited us* in fact because that same smile was there, that same joy present and palpable, and he always ended his response with an invitation: “How does that sound?” or “Does that make sense?”

In an important way this was *the beginning of hermeneutic interpretation*, and this may sound strange and incorrect at first, given that Ted had already treated us to a rich, fulsome interpretation. Allow me a brief detour to explain the gift we all received, and to once again demonstrate how Ted “practices” hermeneutics. In his long and lovely treatment of *the question*, Gadamer states:

The apparently thetic beginning of an interpretation is in fact a response; and the sense of the interpretation, is determined, like every response, by the question asked. *Thus, the dialectic of question and answer always precedes the dialectic of interpretation. It is what determines understanding as an event.* (p. 472, author’s italics)

Why was this an event of understanding? Because, through the question and answer sessions, hidden aspects of the topic, unavailable to us in the lecture, were revealed, brought to language—for Ted too, I think. But this was not an instance of “imperfect understanding” (Gadamer) on Ted’s part. Nor was he simply being kind and generous—although he was certainly that. Rather, Ted was carefully following the *sense and direction* of the question *with the language of the questioner*. His lecture, as Gadamer has provocatively said, was meant to “disappear,” not in the sense of being cast aside, but rather “superseded in the fullness of [new]understanding...This means that they are not just tools that we take up and throw aside when we are done using them, but they belong to the inner articulation of the subject matter” (Gadamer, 1960/1997, p. 473).

I have heard and read much of the work of the hermeneutic circle, but I do not think I have ever experienced its rhythm and hum, its song, as pleasurable as I did at this conference. Caught up in a fundamental, collective rhythm of understanding, experiencing the work as a work of art, being reminded of just how wonderful it was to be alive and fully present—on these lands these too are gifts, excessive in their creation of relationships and further gifts.

Thank-you Ted.

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