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## Guest Editorial

### **The Common Senses of Bunchberries: Mixed Considerations of Writing, Memory, Hermeneutics, and Handheld Devices**

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#### **Introduction: On Memory and Writing**

You, as the father of writing, on account of your positive attitude, are now saying that it does the opposite of what it is able to do. [It] will engender forgetfulness in the souls of those who learn it, for they will not make use of memory. Because of their faith in writing, they will be reminded externally by means of unfamiliar marks, and not from within themselves by means of themselves. You will provide the students with a semblance of wisdom, not true wisdom. For having heard a great deal without any teaching they will seem to be extremely knowledgeable, when for the most part they are ignorant, and are difficult people to be with because they have attained a seeming wisdom without being wise.

Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275a-b

This topic is an old friend to me. I co-wrote a paper back in 1993 with the over-heated title “Relentless Writing and the Death of Memory in Elementary Education.” With my co-author, Grade Three teacher Pam Rinehart, we considered the tendency in schools to turn every experience into “write about it.” Often the reasons are well-intended -- it is practice in writing, it is something concrete to show parents after a shared classroom experience, and so on.

Then again, there was one Grade Three student’s lament after a theatre trip: “Are we going to have to write about it?” (p. 127) – a lament about interrupting the pleasure in just letting oneself savor an experience without the insistences of the written word that Grade Three students are in the middle of learning. What if the theatre performance is beyond my ability to write, potentially turning a lovely experience into an unwanted one? What if I don’t want it to be interrupted?

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Gadamer gives another take about writing and its potential effects on memory and its cultivation:

While [Plato is] declaring the condition of the written word beyond hope, this is obviously an ironic exaggeration with which to conceal his own writing and his own art... There is, then, an art of writing that comes to the aid of thought [and memory and experience]. (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 393)

One can hope that this is the experience of writing that teachers know of and teach their students. One can hope that teachers write if they teach writing. Here, writing is a matter of *composition*, an artful *making* which can help in the composition of memory itself. It is, in my own experience as a writer, a practice of composing myself over the composition of what I have experienced. It not only helps me remember. It helps make what was experienced *more memorable*, if the art of writing works well.

Gadamer (1960/1989, p. 21) stresses, however, that the formation of memory is not equivalent to the memorization of a method or set of rules for critical judgment. It involves, especially for those new to something, the use of images, both in language and in imagination and otherwise, to aid in coming to remember. Gadamer called this the “supplementing of the *critica* of Cartesianism with the old *topica*” (p. 21) as per the suggestions of Giambattista Vico (Gadamer provides no reference here to Vico). It is why, for example, I have come to include visual images in my own writing and, I speculate, why this has become a widespread practice in writing in education.

I would add that stressing “the old *topica*” allows one to imagine memory and experience to be held in places, topographies full of relations and interdependencies that images can embody and evoke. These images of composition, of memory and writing and images themselves are, I suggest, of deep *ecological* importance. They involve finding words that are *adequate to the thing being written about* in its myriad relations, proper to its topographically. They involve something like acting adequately, with some propriety.

Linking memory and writing to the old *topica* thus involves *phronesis*, something like “practical knowledge” (p. 21). It is “directed towards the concrete situation. [I]t must grasp the ‘circumstances’ in their infinite variety” (p. 21) and writing proper to this necessarily involves the written word failing to write every nuance or twist and turn. One must select, experiment, change one’s mind, find one’s way, highlight, exaggerate. Writing must find ways to hand readers over to the infinite variety of the circumstances themselves. It is not just a matter of coming upon something and “subsuming the individual case under a universal category” (p. 21). Instead, old categories, old familiarities, are enlivened by the arrival of a rich new case or event. New questions, new affections arise and fall. What does this circumstance ask of me, what I know, what I’ve read and thought and assumed? What is the right thing to do?

*Phronesis* thus was considered an ethical virtue. “It is not simply practical shrewdness and general cleverness” (p. 22) – not just “know-how” or a pile of recoverable information. It is a “virtue” whose cultivation helps “one distinguishes what should be done from what should not... between the proper and improper and thus presupposes a moral attitude, which it continues to develop (p. 22): Because of its ongoing development, this *sensus communis* “the sense of what is

right and of the common good...is a sense that is acquired through living in the community” (p. 22) and we are never done with it once and for all. It, too, has an ecological character – it must be cared for, attended to, participated in, modified well and carefully, articulated and re-articulated as circumstances arise and fall and test our common sense.

Gadamer goes one step further to suggest that his own hermeneutics “and the ways the human sciences” are “grounded...on this concept of the *sensus communis*” (p. 22) – and thus on a tangle of memory, writing, experience, circumstantiality, propriety and relatedness.

One can consider, in these “ecologically sorrowful times” (Jardine, 2015 p. xv) how urgent such grounding is, especially in these days of AI fakes and distracting online exhaustions and deceptions. Common sense is frailer than the angers and vitriols and deliberate excitations for the purpose of excitation. It requires composing oneself in places that have come to be known and loved. I’m of an age where it is feeling less common, less sensible, but this in part is simply a personal weakness. I am easily distracted and therefore value the composites that writing can bring.

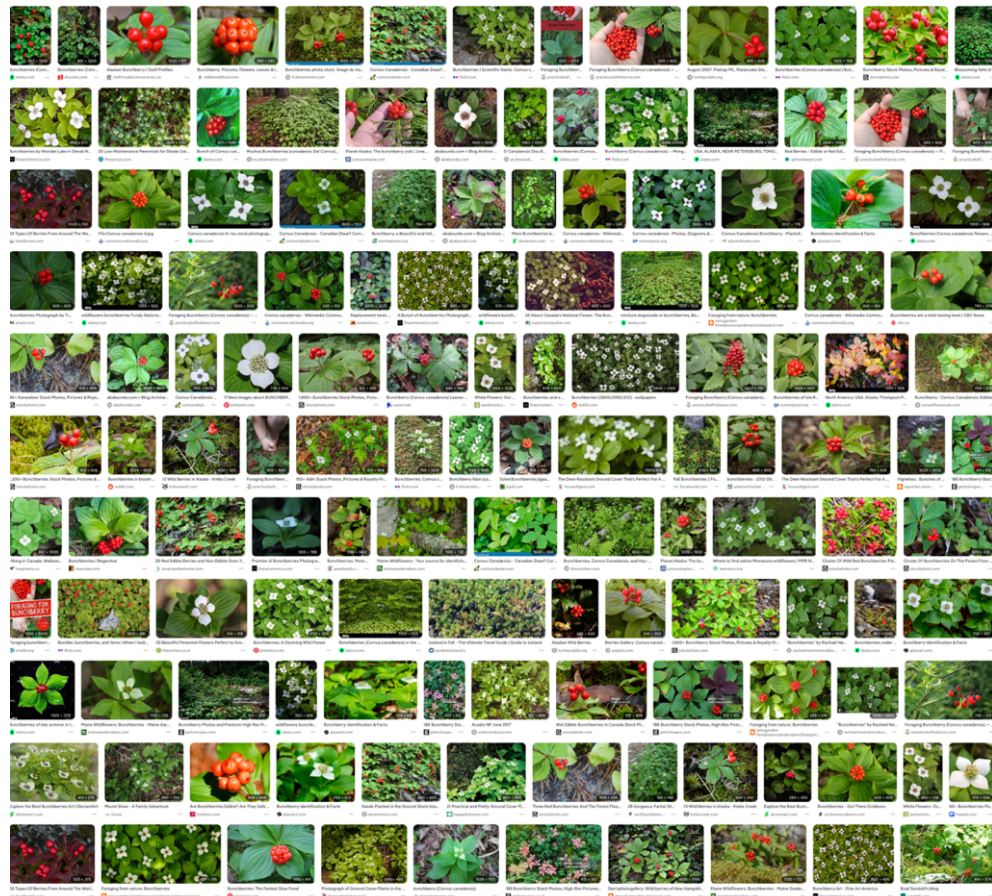
Hermeneutic investigation also tries to understand, to think, to write in ways adequate to the arrival of a summoning circumstance. It attempts to draw readers in to that arrival and its topographical relatedness. The new event arrives into *fields of relations*. Such writing will feel like evasiveness from the point of view of scientific discourse because its “object of interest” evades, occludes, mixes, and is, by its nature, multivocal and deeply enmeshed in the memory, practice, background, and wherewithal of the writer. It is attempting to provide readers with a sense of the spaciousness and myriadness of the circumstance under the pen in ways that free the topic for exploration and avoid, as much as possible, simply gobbling up the topic into my own peculiarities. Hermes often feels like a frivolous joker, a trickster bent on deceit and interruption. The writer is not Hermes but is subject to his whims. To find one’s balance is the art of writing.

But what *for*? On behalf experiencing the life energies (Gadamer, 2007, p. 213) of new uprisings – and of maintaining an understanding of how our understanding of lived experiences “continues to develop” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 22) in the very act of coming to understand, the very act of sharing understanding – how it is premised on other ecological ideas, of continuance, of openness to the arrival of the new, the young (Smith, 1999, 2016) – open to the arrival of the next circumstance which just might prove fecund (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 32; Jardine, 1992) and vital to our understanding of what has already been understood.

The next case can sometimes provide the moment where what seems established and settled gets unsettled and live-wired all over again. The topography opens up, and our imagination becomes enfolded all over again.

Here, next, is the case that initially spurred this writing. As is often the case, hermeneutics finds hermeneutics and its lessons in finding its way through the case.

## Bunchberries and Thoughts on How to Handle a New App



Lifetimes of Work Blurred in a Moment's Notice  
(image by the Author)

Bunchberries. *Cornus Canadensis*. Latin for “horn.” Latin for “Canada.” This plant species has been on our property near the Eastern Slopes of the Rocky Mountains since we arrived here, now 38 years ago. I never did “look it up” and out of cautionary ignorance, steered clear of the berries except for loving the look of it, loving its regular reappearances year after year. My son and I have walked this place for decades, noticing, not noticing, pointing out the new bear scat and talking a bit louder because of it. This huge dear this past summer:





*Sweet Ursa* (image by the author)

Now his two sons (2 ½ and 4 ½ years-old) walk with him the same land. What is noticed therefore clusters into familialness – an odd word, but an important derivative of familiarity, like the circumstances that bristle around circumstances – it plays with Ludwig Wittgenstein’s terms for how language itself weaves together: “family resemblances,” (p. 32), “kinships” (p. 36). It is the arena of work of Hermes, the tricks of families and their tangled, often unexamined bloodlines. It is the arena of education – the old and the young huddling around the knowledge entrusted to us in schools.

My son has an App on his phone that allows him to identify plant species and their characteristics in seconds. Easier than finding my way to the bookshelf which *might* have a book on local plants. He found that the berries on this plant are edible and he and his two boys now partake freely, while he also talks with them about carefulness in identification, plant characteristics and warrantable cautions (see Adamant, 2025 –note, I picked this reference out of hundreds of possibilities and did not check its veracity. It “looked good” –the charm of pretty faces or shiny surfaces. Quick access can easily lead to quick consideration and quick acceptance and citation).

If you’re not sure, check and re-check. We talk of how the bears rely on this plant and many others. Have berries. Leave some. Linnaeus’ Latinate name and the berries characteristics thus move outwards into sustenances, local mouths to feed...again, profoundly and simply ecological in character.

Watch some be both eaten and left:





A Bunch of Berries

But why bother remembering it when you can always look it up? Why bother looking it up when you can always look it up? Writing is one thing. But now, with handheld devices, one can carry almost-weightlessly the wealth of the world. One can *never look anything up at all*, never remember anything. One can remain empty. Of course, this is nothing new. Plato was concerned about writing itself as a detriment to the formation of memory.

But the handheld can come to have a rich inner life whilst mine remains poverty stricken. I gain no heft, no weight, no gravity. I float free. Well, it seems like freedom, but I am still subject to the world's weights without having a hand in it. I become an easy mark for deceptions, distortions, and the utterly capacious maw of marketing and other suasions, all glittering by, full of promises, driven by things I did happen to light upon the screen. I recall looking up my own books on amazon to check their numbers – a futile, embarrassing thing all by itself – and then moving to Politico.com to find my own books advertised back to me a minute later. A good lesson, this.

So, the event. My son said this: “I want to know that plant when I see it without my phone. I want to walk out there *myself*, where there are bunchberries. I want the boys to be able to do that, too.”

To learn that there are bunchberries and that *these* are them and some things about their place here in this place – *myself*. And that the bunchberry information comes with bears and scat and squirrels and deer and seasons and winter coming and air and the whole web of environmental

circumstances. And they are edible. And delicious. It is not as simple as now having information that I did not have before. It is not simply a subjective “add-on” to the way the world has already been all along. There is this new “transcendence” of my “self” that is now possible – I myself open outward into a world that has identifiable bunchberries, and bear scat, and winter having come since starting to write this paper. *The world is richer than it was before*. The world has become richer than it appeared to be before. Hmm, or I can now experience more richness of the world that was there all along but which was denied me because I . . . what? Didn’t know – ah! Wait a sec’. *Wasn’t familiar with*. Again, a vaguely ecological issue of kinship unnoticed. Of my own character becoming more apt to the place I live in. This is not just a matter of adding my own subjectivity to the equations – not *just* that. The world has changed. My own weight and its weight have weighed each other.

This reminds me of thumbing through Roger Tory Peterson’s (1980) *A Field Guide to The Birds East of the Rockies* (4th ed., 1980) and noticing that there were three types of Chickadees. I know for a fact that I had never actually seen three different Chickadees -- Black-Capped, Mountain, and Brown Capped. Before this thumbing, I did not *live* in a forest with three types of Chickadees, even though, with some slow observation, I discovered that, well, yes I did. Reading Peterson’s writing *made the world in which I live more elaborate and varied and true*. It is not just that I had a new stockpile of information that I could cleverly wield at a moment’s notice. The world wielded more graciously than before. Writing helped form my memory and my memory helped form the world I lived in, helped it be itself. Words fail, but this is a lovely spot nevertheless and one dear to hermeneutics itself. Memory and understanding, in hermeneutics, are linked to the formation of character, and the formation of character is linked to the ability to experience the world. And even more than this:

“Being experienced” does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who . . . because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive [amassed] knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself. (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 355)

It is as simply as this: if I have remembered well, *those there* are *not* bunchberries. If I have remembered well, there is that passage about “being experienced” that might fit well here and help the writing and reading along. Memory of it rose up as I wrote. It was summoned because *I myself* remembered it and found it and offered it here.

This is why ecological relatedness often requires some long, thoughtful, playful introductions and re-introductions and hermeneutic writing invites re-reading, re-citing anew in new circumstances. It feels a bit like just playing about, but then Mircea Eliade shows up as does Augustine via Mary Carruthers and the bibliographic list of my own over self-citations:

Cogitation makes us expand, expansion stretches us out, and stretching makes us roomier.” For Augustine, the pieces brought together in *cogitatio* make a sum greater than its parts. Knowledge extends understanding not by adding on more and more pieces, but

because as we compose [a composition, recall, which is intimately linked to memory and its cultivation] our design becomes more capacious, it dilates. (Carruthers 2005, p. 199)

The gatherings of voices in memory, then, and our cultivation of them and our care and devotion to this process of self-formation actually expand “myself” to include, now, this weird voice of Augustine talking about becoming “roomier” as a result of learning and its meditative-memorial practices. I become different in learning about this heretofore unheard-of connection between this dissolution of the self-containedness of the Cartesian-*critica* “I am” and the great body-function of dilation. (Jardine et. al., 2008, p. 52)

“Keeping ourselves open” and “keeping the world open” (Eliade, 1968, p. 139) are the same thing. As we become experienced, having cleaved with affection and made ourselves “roomier,” the world’s roominess can be experienced. (Jardine et al., 2008, p. 53)

And then the stun. Another circumstance. Peterson’s field guide. 1980. 44 years ago. It has aged as I have aged. 1980-2025. What guidance is now needed to be guided well now? I know the coyotes have long since disappeared. Perhaps this book has become ecologically disastrously out of date. Perhaps now it hides family knowledge we desperately need under the forest fire smokes.

A handheld – like discipline sketched in a curriculum guide, or a book -- is always held in *someone’s* hands. My son’s handheld becomes something more and more complex. Its quickness, up-to-datedness, and immediacy does not have to be the immediacies of “Look at this! Look at that! HAVE YOU HEARD THE LATEST!” It *can* serve to check and wake up “common sense” and its tendencies towards tranquillization, flatness and levelling (Heidegger, 1962) just as much as reading Heidegger can do so. The too-familiar circumstances of Chick-a-dees hereabouts, now, as winter 2025 settles in. Are there still three given the brimful shifts of climatic matters? And here it is mattering in the smallest of ways. one house, one feeder, two young boys whose mattering matters to me and their family.

I’m still not buying “a phone.” I can’t handle it/myself properly. Good on you if you can. But I’d better be checking at the feeder this Winter for three magicians come feasting.

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