"Some say the Present Age is not the Time for Meditation:" Thoughts on Things Left Unsaid in Contemporary Invocations of Traditional Education

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, we contend that the term *traditional education* has come to be identified, for the most part, with the worst that traditions have to offer (rote memorization, authoritarianism, etc.) and that this (mis-)identification has ignored another, more thoughtful, meditative and intellectually vigorous thread that forms part of most traditions. We explore a small part of the history of this mis-identification and some of its consequences. In particular, we consider the situation of Moslems in contemporary Canadian school settings and how this weak and intellectually impoverished understanding of traditional education has become part of a cultural debate.

RESUME: Dans cet écrit, nous soutenons que le terme *enseignement classique* doit être identifié. La plus grande partie de l'enseignement est empreinte du pire que les traditions ont à offrir (mémorisation par coeur, autoritarisme, etc.). Cette (més) identification a ignoré un autre fil conducteur plus sensé, réfléchi et intellectuellement efficace qui fait partie de la plupart des traditions. Nous parcourons ici une petite portion de l'histoire de cette (més) identification et quelques unes de ses conséquences. Nous nous attardons en particulier sur la situation des Musulmans dans le contexte scolaire canadien d'aujourd'hui et sur la façon dont cette compréhension faible et intellectuellement appauvrie du système scolaire classique, fait partie d'un débat culturel.

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I

One cannot achieve realization merely by listening
To the perfect teachings of Buddha.
As a weak person may die of thirst
While being carried away by a great river,
So the Dharma is ineffective unless meditated upon.
(Namgyal, 2006, pp. 5, 9)

The text entitled *Mahamudra – The Moonlight – Quintessence of Mind and Meditation* (2006, translated from Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, 1511-1587) happened to be next on the summer pile of reading as we began talking about the topic of this paper: how the term *traditional* is being bandied about once again in schools in Calgary, Alberta as a clarion call for often heated, often contradictory, desires regarding children and their education.

We are concerned that something profound is being lost and forgotten in how the terms *traditional learning* and (therefore) *traditional schools* are being used. Something about tradition, and what learning means in a living tradition, has been effaced. We are living, it seems, with a weird exaggeration of the worst that tradition might mean. Many schools seem carried away with a sort of ever-accelerating fragmentation of the living disciplines of the world which have been entrusted to teachers and students in schools, and intellectual, meditative thoughtfulness has come to seem arcane, archaic, like a quaint antique not apt for the present age.

We cannot speak on behalf of universals in this matter, but can only invoke cases, instances, and threads of thought that suggest an always emergent "family resemblance" (Wittgenstein, 1968, p. 36). The words cited above from 15th century Tibet, translated through into English, strike something that seems familiar, familial – in many elementary school classrooms in and around Calgary, merely listening and repeating by rote, merely memorizing and regurgitating, merely remaining silent and having no questions of one's own, have come to be what is understood by traditional learning. Learning as a form of meditation and self-formation has been erased or, worse yet, subjectivized as something beyond the reach of efficient and effective schooling.

What seems to be invoked in the use of the term traditional is, we suggest, a suppressed by-product of early 20th century efficiency movement of Frederick Winslow Taylor (1911), wherein the logic of the

assembly line and army regimentation were used to re-cast the nature of public schooling and make it more manageable and efficient. Workers ("teachers") were handed simple instructions for repeated tasks, set to specific time limits and quality control measures. They each worked on an isolatable and definable piece of the overall task ("curriculum content" was thus sub-divided and developmentally sequenced), such that there would be no confusion or thought required, and also such that, if there was a problem with the end results, the specific site of the problem could be found and fixed. If a child has trouble, for example, with certain grammatical forms, the specific grade in which this was taught can be located and assessed for its effectiveness in the production of knowledge of this grammatical form. And, of course, in the end, if there is no problem with the line and its workers, the issue is then located in the child itself and serviced by the proliferation of special needs interventions.

The term traditional in North American educational circles thus comes loaded with connotation. It is surrounded by clusters of negatively charged images: rote memorization done in orderly rows; silent, seated children all facing one way; authoritarian teachers; strict disciplinary and managerial orderliness; images of children as wild and willful and needing these wills to be broken (cf. Miller, 1989); questions are simply problems to be fixed so that silence can once again reign; mathematized forms of assessment – akin to statistically formulated experimental method – not only hold sway, but form and shape the very nature of pedagogy itself; curriculum content subjected to the logic of fragmentation and breakdown into its smallest, most easily manageable bits and pieces ("the basics," so to speak); the managed doling out of knowledge by the teacher and the passive reception of such fragmented bits by students, who then must dole them out themselves on examinations that are themselves designed under the auspices of fragmentation and management.

One of the most pernicious threads of this line of thinking is not simply that it has re-cast the nature of public schooling in light of industrial production images of manageablity and efficiency. Far worse is that the very idea, the very possibility of public accountability, the very idea of giving a warrantable account of the value and worth of an educational setting has become linked with the manageability and efficiency of that account. Good schooling is about management, about manageable results. Objective test scores are themselves by-products of the dovetailing of the efficiency movement and a great early 20th century

faith that schooling can become the controllable, predictable, and manageable (Habermas, 1972) object of the statistically-based methods of empirical science, and that classrooms can be run with all the uncontaminated results of a well-run experiment.

If this bespeaks something of the present age, then meditation, inquiry, and scholarly reflection and debate certainly do seem childish, laughably arcane, unproductive. In such a light, reflecting, thinking, and worrying over how one's knowledge comes to shape one's life and character are not considered proper matters for school. Long and complex conversations in a Grade Ten Social Studies class about British Minister Jack Straw's comments about Moslem women wearing *hijabs* and one student's (a Moslem girl, wearing a *hijab*) comment that it is often seen as "hiding something" – such matters come to appear to be at best private or personal matters and, at worst, time-wasting, resource-wasting, unaccountable, subjective, emotionally laden, biased, unaccountable, Liberal Arts frills only pursuable by those with too much time on their hands. Such meditation becomes a term of elitism and intellectualism. School bespeaks no such scholarly leisure, even though its etymology (L. *schola*) suggests that, traditionally, this is exactly what it was for in some bygone age – not the present – when there was time for such meditation.

Another one of those Grade Ten Social Studies students talks to me (David Jardine) about how she understands that her *hijab* is seen by many as a form of oppression. She explained how, in her tradition, if you wear a *hijab* simply because someone tells you to, you might as well not wear it at all. She also voiced a profound idea about herself and her classmates. Some of her female classmates believe that they are free to dress any way they want and if a boy ogles them, it is the boy's fault. She, on the other hand, suggested that how she is looked at affects who she is, and that it is her responsibility, at least in part, to protect how she is seen, because letting herself be seen a certain way is who she *is*.

Some say, however, that the present age is not a time for such meditations. In the present age, linking this student's comment up with work on Christian ideas of protecting the gaze (cf. Illich, 2001) seem at once trivial and extravagant. It is too meditative in a school reality where simply managing the onrush of every accelerating event seems the norm.

II

> The key issue is ... the removal of the shadow thrown by economic structures onto the cultural domain. For this purpose we need to learn how to speak in a disciplined way ... choosing words that do not surreptitiously drag in assumptions of scarcity. (Illich, 1992, p. 45)

We would like to suggest that these Taylorized images of tradition and traditional learning are, in fact, profoundly impoverished. They are the by-products of education imagined in light of what Ivan Illich (1992, p. 118) named "regimes of scarcity," wherein economic/managerial discourse has come to hold sway. In such a discourse, management and production become central to our imagining of education itself. Again, this is, we suggest, a suppressed by-product of Taylor's early 20th century industrial efficiency movement inculcated into the educational imagination. It is so deeply inculcated, in fact, that any questioning of it eventually devolves into a seeming call for a return to *inefficiency*.

Many late 20th century critiques of such industrial models of traditional education seem to have abandoned the term traditional and have therefore, we suggest, unwittingly equated this term with its impoverished form. This is similar to a phenomenon encountered in recent attempts to revive the phrase "back to the basics" where the very idea of basics is identified with its impoverished form. In such abandonment, what sometimes occurs is that the critique of traditional schools and schooling becomes fashioned as little more than the *inverse* of the impoverished form: child-centeredness, an emphasis on untethered individuality and the uniqueness of each child, soft, blurry, emotionally laden forms of assessment geared first and foremost to the preservation of self-esteem, and the cowardly belief – a sort of "vacuous licentiousness" (Smith, 1999, p. 139) – that any work a child does is *good* because any judgement otherwise is a return to the authoritarianism of traditional learning that the critique has abandoned. (This line of thought refracts in wonderful ways with those Grade Ten Social Studies considerations of the *hijab*).

We suggest that the inverse of impoverishment is still impoverished, and still tethered, unwittingly, to that which it rejects – a weak and debased understanding of tradition.

There is a further step here that we must note with caution and concern. This is how the rumored logic goes around Calgary, Alberta. In

the midst of all the calls for accountability and parent and student choice, those many who say the present age is not the time for meditation are understood to be voicing a cultural preference. Wanting an education for one's children that is exploratory, thoughtful, reflective, questioning, worldly, and authentic to the living disciplines of the world, is a *cultural choice* in a multicultural city. The demand for schools and schooling that are traditional is thus understood as a cultural demand, as witnessed by the (so it is rumored) common desire for such schools from new immigrants to the country and to our city.

And here are the two final twists. First (so goes the hushed line of thought), Moslem families in particular often seek out such traditional schools and schooling because their cultural life is rooted in the commonplace cultural practice of the rote memorization of the *Qu'uran*. Second, critically reflecting upon or resisting this impoverished version of traditional schools and schooling that is afoot in the city is a form of cultural prejudice. The University of Calgary's inquiry-based teacher-education program has been thus publicly and privately criticized as preparing new teachers for a type of schooling that is *culturally biased*, and that its promoting of inquiry and reflection and meditation as part of teacher-education is inculcating a cultural bias into new teachers entering the field.

In an ironic twist, just as education is beginning to effectively loosen the grip of all the old mind-numbing practices of 19th century pedagogy, where willful, wild children (cf. Miller, 1989) were stripped of their primitiveness in ways precisely analogous to the colonial civilizing of the Empire's "children" (e.g., Smith, 1999, 2006; Nandy, 1987; Jardine, 2004, 2006), many immigrants to Canada are (so it is rumored) demanding precisely this sort of imperial pedagogy as an expression of their cultural difference and, even more bewildering, as a sign of a return to traditional education.

The mind, of course, reels. In the name of diversity and difference and tolerance, a form of schooling based on convergence, sameness, and an intolerance of any disruption of that self-same singularity, is promoted. And the recasting of Islam as especially traditional in this impoverished sense is, especially in these post-9/11 times, as understandable as it is unconscionable. We do not see much of the images of Islam as full of meditation and thought and care and love. There is no hint of how Islam protected knowledge and wisdom during the Dark Ages of Christian Europe. We see only Taliban-like children,

where no child is left behind in the regime of blind, unthinking obedience.

III

> In the Koran, the first thing God said to Muhammad was "Read." (Baker, as cited in Winter, 2005, n.p.)

As an immigrant parent with one young child in school and another soon to be, these matters leave me (Rahat Naqvi) with a deep sense of insecurity. I come with a very strong sense of roots and ancestry – a strong sense of tradition. My maiden name is Zaidi. Derived from "Zaid" it literally means "aspiring for greatness." The Zaids held a privileged status in history: considered as direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad's family, they were known in history as warriors. The ways in which, in these post-9/11 times, my own roots and ancestry are culturally embattled and being used in weak and demeaning ways in heated public debates about schools, have made me understand the need to be such a warrior. I am not going to let the dominant culture erase these notions of ancestry and tradition that are deeply embedded in me. But what is this dominant culture? Our family lives in a "white," mainly Christian, suburban neighborhood and my daughter attends the local school. Who am I in the midst of all of this? Who is my child? Is she a Zaidi or a Naqvi? Which does she need to be? What does it mean to be a Naqvi in Calgary, Alberta, today, in these times of war, at this time of Christmas greetings and green trees hauled into the house and lit up? What does it mean to aspire for greatness in what Judith Butler has called "precarious times" (2004; see also Naqvi & Prasow, 2007)? How can I hold on to some of what I can only express as "my traditions" and how might those traditions properly be understood? Have I – has my daughter – been turned into a blind and obedient memorizer of the *Quranic* verses? Is this what the *traditions* of Islam demand? Is this the nature of knowledge, of learnedness, of devotion, demanded of me and my child?

These matters can never be answered in general. In all traditions, Islam included, some people spend their lives as unthinking, obedient, memorizers.

One does not come to properly resist this unthoughtfulness by simply dumping tradition itself. My daughter has, until recently, attended the mosque where she spends her time with a script (in our case Arabic) and a book, the *Quranic* verses. She puts on her veil (*hijab*)

and spends time learning this script and this scripture. Part of the work is learning this language and memorizing some of these verses.

But in her classes, until recently, *what it is that is memorable about those verses* is the real issue. Her teacher, in one session, spent time circulating a real apple and a plastic replica around the class, and the young children spent time thinking and talking and listening to conversations about what it means for something to be real and not fake, not plastic. What was discussed, as well, was the miraculous way in which humans have this ability to be conscious of, and to experience, the truth of things, to experience their reality and their gift, and to see through fakeness and phoniness.

As part of another day's work (and, yet, connected deeply with these apples), my daughter colored in a "black line master" drawing of a young girl, just awoken, sitting on the edge of her bed, morning sunshine streaming in the window. At the bottom of the sheet is a morning *do'a* – a morning prayer. The Arabic script is transliterated as:

Allhamdullillahilladzii ahyaana ba'da maa amaata naa wa ilaihinnusyuur

and translated thus:

All Praises to Allah who has given us life (consciousness) after taking it away.

And to Him we shall return.

First, it is interesting to note that these black-line-master school-activities are oddly *trans-cultural* in ways that bear some future thought. Second, part of Maria's work was to recite and practice and then to memorize the phrase at the bottom of this sheet, both in Arabic and in the English translation. We all fully understand how repeated chanting and practice and memorization are themselves ancient practices. However, even if the *do'a*'s words are memorized, *what is being said, what it means about one's life, one's culture, one's family, one's future*, cannot be learned by rote but only by reflection and thought and conversation and application to oneself and one's circumstances. Memorization is inadequate to what tradition requires of us in such a statement about awakening, about consciousness and experience and praise. Thus, even to the extent that something like rote memorization is a part of what is occurring, it is not for its own sake or for the sake of being able to repeat it by rote on some measured and managed examination. Far from it. Simple rote memorization of such matters without application and thought and meditation, without time and

occurrence and re-occurrence and venture and obligation and witnessing, without a family and friends, without others to converse and dispute and agree with about such matters and how we might live in a knowledge of them – without these, memorization is not only meaningless, mechanical, and imposed. It is *ridiculous*.

The *measure* of these words is one's life and how it is lived.

IV

> For Petrarch, as for Bernard and Quintilian ... when one unwittingly or from laziness quotes *verbaliter* because one's memory-design has been overwhelmed by the *turba* [like the turbulence of being carried away by a great river in the Buddhist image above] of all the pieces ... that is a failure of memory. It makes oneself appear ridiculous and shameful, like a clown in ill-fitting clothes, whose garments are not "familiar" to him. It is a failure of invention because it is a failure of memory, that educated *memoria* of [one] who knows. (Carruthers, 2005, p. 220)

Mathew Zachariah, a colleague of ours at the University of Calgary, once said that fundamentalists of different religions have more in common with each other than they do with many of those in their own religion. Darkness, closure, fear, paranoia, xenophobia, blind obedience, literalism, anger, a "monstrous states of seige" (Smith 1999, p. 140) between self and others, us and them, young and old, the new and the established – these all have kin across traditions. These are tradition, we suggest, at its worst, at its stupidest and most dull and dangerous. In such ways in the world, we share a terrible common ancestry. And we need to understand, clearly and unequivocally, that, under threat, a reversion to the pretense of safety and security that such closures seem to offer makes a terrible sort of sense (see Jardine, Friesen, & Clifford, 2006, pp. 57-60). In these post-9/11 times, we have all, to varying degrees, retrenched back into manageable and monitorable border-security limits.

But tradition teaches us something else, that all traditions are not constituted simply by what they display about themselves with their backs up against the wall. Islam, as much as any other tradition, also implores being mindful of the world and to see the gift of knowledge and experience as a gift of care for what is known. Mindfulness, humility,

hesitation, thought – these, too, are deep traditions held in kinship and kind.

When we provoke our children to remember things, to memorize, to make memorable, we suggest that impoverished versions of traditional learning have even misunderstood this phenomenon. The work of learning is, as St. Bede suggested, a meditative, memorial, memory-forming activity, "a process of meditative composition or collocative reminiscence – 'gathering, *colligere*" (Carruthers, 2003, p. 33). What is gathered in memory must not be simply stored up in some anonymous, automatically and efficiently retrievable inventory, but must be inventively worried over, worked, revisited, re-read, applied to one's life, mumbled, "murmured" (Carruthers 2005, p. 164). If I do not thus meditatively compose myself and what I have come to know and understand, my memory will not be *my own*. "*Memoria* is most usefully thought of as a compositional art. The arts of memory are among the arts of thinking, especially involved with fostering the qualities we now revere as 'imagination' and 'creativity' " (Carruthers, 2003, p. 9). What I know will no longer be deeply ingrained and implicated in who I am. I might be able to repeat the words – *Allhamdullillahilladzii ahyaana ba'da maa amaata naa wa ilaihinnusyuur* – and such repetition can be manageably assessed in an efficient way, but such repetition by itself seems clownish, foolish, remiss of the real work of education.

Unless memory becomes a meditative, compositional act, one simply drowns in the turbulence that *traditional schools* seem to promote. We suggest that the core work of traditional education lies in the work of remembering what these words ask of me and composing my life in light of such knowledge – becoming someone because of what I know, and not simply being a repository for a memorized mass. Such meditative matters are at the heart of traditional education, and the difficulties we face in learning to live with such matters is part of their beauty and strength.

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