

***“To Lend Ourselves to its Life”: Some Nearby
Thoughts on Early Literacy and other Early
Matters***

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Abstract: This paper is a grandparent's thoughts while watching his kin read and be read to. As a former Language Arts teacher and practicum supervisor of student-teachers in the early years, I've been granted a strange, up close place view of the in the emergence of literacy.

Résumé : Cet article présente ce qu'un grand-parent pense en regardant ses proches lire et se faire lire. En tant qu'ancienne enseignante d'arts du langage et superviseure de stage de futurs enseignants au pré-scolaire, on m'a accordé une vision étrange et rapprochée de la littératie précoce.

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Preamble

As a former Language Arts teacher and practicum supervisor of student-teachers in the early years, I've been granted a strange, up close view of the in the emergence of literacy. I'm surrounded by it, loving it, writing about it nearly non-stop lately (Jardine, 2023a, b; in press a, b; under consideration; Adams & Jardine, in press). Such is the upwell of new-yet-familiar experiences and their temptations.

As per the hermeneutic and phenomenological urge, readers will notice that the writing that follows is not just *about* the “interweaving and criss-crossing” (Wittgenstein, 1968, p. 32) that constitutes the life of language itself caught clearly in its emergence, not just *about* how life and its emergences shows language’s haziness, life’s haziness ((Gadamer, 2007, p. 371) when we consider it up close. Rather, the writing itself is deliberately interweaving and hazy, not just as some poetic trick, but *because its topic is interweaving and hazy*. Something hazy and weaving seems more proper to the object under consideration.

“To Lend Ourselves to its Life”



The whole of spoken language surrounding the child snaps him up like a whirlwind, tempts him by its internal articulations. The untiring ways in which the train of words crosses and re-crosses itself finally sways the child over to the side of those who speak. Only language as a

whole enables one to understand how language draws the child to himself.

...
We only have to lend ourselves to its life, to its movement of differentiation and articulation, and to its eloquent gestures. (Merleau-Ponty, 1970, p. 40-41, 42).

We hand ourselves over, we abandon ourselves to the space of meaning which holds sway over us. (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 187).

Two kin pouring over a book. Glances. Mouth agape. Looking back and forth. Imitations. Affections. Breaths mingling in a soft, quite literal conspiracy. Play and interplay. "A space specially marked out and reserved" (Gadamer, 1989, p.107). "This is for *us*, not for the 'others'. What the 'others' do 'outside' is of no concern to us at the moment" (Huizinga, 1955, p. 12). The happenstance of a photograph stands outside this orbit, exorbitant, peering in, bewildered by the wilds of what it captures and what it fails to capture.

That this is utterly ordinary, and commonplace is extraordinary in its own way. These two lending themselves to a movement of words and expressions and imitations, of differentiations and articulations. So familiar. So lovely.

Now, 15 months later, Grandpa's lap, sunshine, smiles, where likeness, kinship, of a kind-ness, resemblance, similarity, bubble and giggle over a book, the flipping pages of which is part of its mysterious whirlwind. That patience I'm now re-learning -- to wait and let him point to the truck or the animal or the cat that catches him. Letting the pages seemingly indiscriminately flip by, then remembering how often I've witnessed distracted magazine flipping, or, I'm told, apparently phone screen flippings flipping by, where the flipping is part of the allure. A sort of humming repetition, mesmerizing in its own way, spellbinding in its own way.

Deep breaths are often needed when sure footing is sought in such matters. I searched out this old, old reference that now seems altogether new and telling and needing pause:

The subject of postmodernity is best understood as the ideal-type channel-hopping MTV viewer who flips through different images at such speed that she/he is unable to chain the signifiers together into a meaningful narrative, he/she merely enjoys the multiphrenic

intensities and sensations of the surface of the images.
(Usher & Edwards 1994, p. 11)

1994

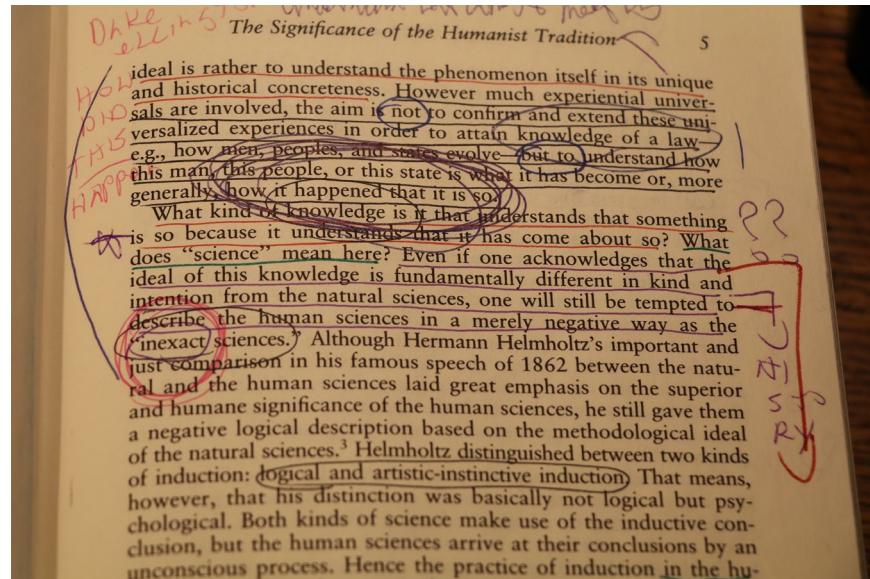
A sure sign that scholarly memory must needs be longer than sometimes allowed. I must quiet myself over these matters again and again. Pause. This young boy's flipping fast through pages is not that flipping, but such flipping is all around us. But this is a future he has in store – to immerse in, to resist, to learn about or from, to be lost in, or found. Me with still no cellphone, not really knowing if that is what they're called anymore, I'm too old to say much except here, to write a bit and calm myself down. Watch. There:

Language itself is a form of life, and like life, it is hazy *[diesig]*; over and over it will surround us with a haze. Again and again, we move for a while in a self-lighting haze, a haze that again envelops us as we seek the right word. Life is easier when everything goes according to one's own wishes, but the dialectic of recognition requires that there can be no easy laurels. We learn this from the resistance we feel in ourselves when we let the other person be right. To make ourselves aware of this, the best help may be for us to get as fully as possible into the matter itself, and in the end to see ourselves as put into question. (Gadamer, 2007, p. 371)

My grandson cuddled with a book. Picking up that same book again and again to flip, to point, to read, to sit together and murmur and laugh. Again. Again. To stop over a page stock still and staring. Wait. This old hermeneutic adage, that his pause over this picture that caught his attention *just might be trying to teach me something or remind me of something I have long-since forgotten*.

The Catch of Attention

Ah. That moment when a text, shall we say, "speaks," and urges me to stop over it and mark the occasion. Stop flipping. Become agape. Halted. That strange similarity to me, pen in hand, pausing, noting, then, the same book, the same page, the same word or line, again and again (Gadamer, 1989, p. 5):



"Understanding begins when *something* addresses *us*" (Gadamer, 1989, p. 299). The emphases added here are akin to its own pen-in-hand gesture regarding the agency of texts and pictures. Stop. Pen. Underline. We are sometimes *struck* and struck again. *It* addresses *me*, mouth agape:

[Something] compels over and over, and the better one knows it, the more compelling it is. There comes a moment when something is there something one should not forget and cannot forget. This is not a matter of mastering an area of study (Gadamer, 2007, p. 115)

And how the stars and the circles and the marginalia start becoming comments on each other, crossing and re-crossing. And how I want to re-underline the last sentence of this block citation, because it still puzzles me. I like it. I *think* it may be right about something I still don't quite understand how to say. I don't want to forget it and I don't quite "get it," all in one fell swoop. A very ordinary phenomenon that readers of a certain ilk understand. This is a way to understand something of what this young child is doing. The same kind of thing I do, not identical, but not exactly different, either. It is not a matter of mastering the text, but of "mastering" my ability to follow it, wait over it.

And the happenstance of this passage selected originally only for the elaborateness of the different pens chosen with each re-reading. Sometimes you happen upon something: this writing, here, now, itself is not an attempt to confirm a universal or a law, but to muse my way through how it happened that this is so, this familiar, familial sitting and pointing, and underlining, how his mouth agape at something that “hits the spot” is just *like* reading and finding myself reaching for the pen. The intent, here, in writing this, is not to be “inexact,” let alone “poetic,” but to try to lend myself to familiar inexactness of this nebulous thing itself. This is my son and my grandson. This is the long arc of words and sounds and writing which we all lend ourselves to in varying degrees, with varying dedications and tales to tell or not.

An analogy I first found years ago and underlined, one that parses something of the strength and pliability of this cluster of phenomena and their pedagogical and familial character. Ludwig Wittgenstein is talking of how the understandability and familiarity of language and experience and gesture and mouths agape in everyday life is not based on some exact, univocal singularity that each instance bears identically, but is based instead on something more recognizable:

As in spinning a thread, we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres. Don't say “There must be something common” . . . but look and see whether there is anything common to all. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think but look! We see a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances” [Familienahnlichkeiten]. (Wittgenstein 1968, p. 32)

Based on something more like a pliable, forgiving net or web that is being woven as it is being traverse and re-traversed. It is little wonder, having been involved in early childhood education and teacher education and the care of pre-service teachers in their practicum classrooms, that this philosophy of everyday language,

everyday life, everyday understanding and practice, would have an appeal. The appeal of lived familiarity or, as Wittgenstein calls it, “kinship” (p. 33). These are genealogical invocations about the life of language and literacy, early and otherwise. I can’t deny how often I have cited this passage over decades. It has become my strange familiar, like the black cat on the end of the witch’s broom, an animal energy, of a sort, a reliable animating energy with which children’s books are often teeming. The troll under the bridge with a message. Ravenspirits at the water’s edge up north warning of dangers. Kid’s stuff. Sort of. So many future books to read as aging, his and mine, will or won’t permit.

The effect of cleaving towards this sort of thinking about early literacy has a strange and familiar heart, as well:

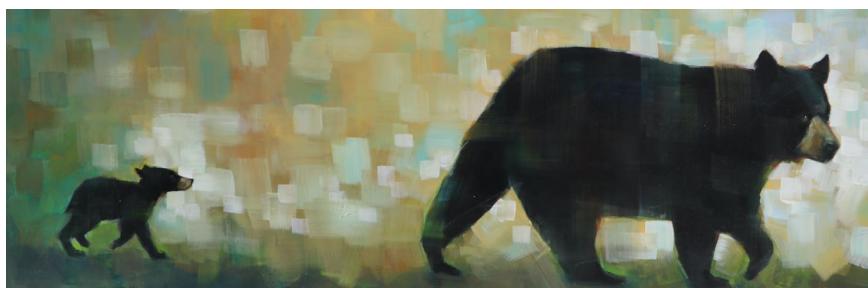
The conversation that a family resemblance opens up can always be taken up anew. In that conversation [with on-campus pre-service teachers about Blueberries for Sal (McClosky, 1976) and the parallels between a mother bear and her cub, and a human mother and her child, both seeking out blueberries on the same hill] we may determine that both “sides” of the analogy—the human mother/child and the bear mother/child—involve, say, “care and attention.” We find, however, in exploring this idea of “care and attention” that far from being a way in which these two families are identical, “care and attention” are themselves [not “laws” or “universals,” but must be] understood analogously [that is, as they manifest in the case and its intimacies]. These two families are alike in care and attention, but again, neither simply identical nor different. (Jardine, 2005, p. 92-93)

“Identical” or “different” would make it easier to simply tell a beginning teacher, or new parent, what to do and that would be the end of it. However, it is well known that what to do is worked out in the inner intimacies of the effort to do it – “the true locus . . . is this in between” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 295) whose nebulosity and specificity are precisely its sources and well-springs. “It depends” is not an admission of some sort of watery “whatever.” It is not the common mistake of “child-centeredness” or its opposite. Rather, it is a call to attend carefully to the relations and emergings and dependencies as they arise and act, with all the carefulness and elaborateness, in their accord, and stumble, fall, laugh, watch others

as they read to young children, try it out again, and, well “catch the point.” And catch precisely this point, that “the point” will *always* be held “in between,” and therefore the threads will *always* have to be re-woven the next time out, caught hold of anew as we are caught up anew in a new book. And then, of course, this ecological tale of the hill they both traverse and its wide embrace, its ways, its jeopardies of sun and water and air and seasons. And another oft-cited familiar of mine, to paraphrase: a child’s book like this old one, if deeply and lovingly read, causes worlds and worlds of relations to “break open,” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 382) “break forth” (p. 458) and catch us up in whirlwinds of “responding and summoning” (p. 458).

Bears, Owls and Sheep

“Analogical integrities” (Berry, 2009, p. 138), “integrated curriculum” of a sort, borne out as my grandson and I peruse the paintings around my house, pointing, murmuring. Here’s one. Speaking of *Blueberries for Sal*, mother and child and another hint of a line of reading the world and reading the book, reading your father’s face, your child’s and reading the bears who were reading the hill just *like* the humans were:



“Wait for Me” by Connie Geerts (www.conniegeerts.com),
used with her permission.

As per McCloskey’s book, both children cleave to a certain closeness. A young one will skip and hop a step to stay behind a bit, but not too far behind. Reading the signs, but only “so to speak.” Look at those white squares washing up over the mother’s back and how the cub has his nose just nicely in their sway. In McClosky’s book, the human mother gathering to preserve for later, the human child close enough to dip her hand in the gathering basket over and over again, to eat, of course.

The feel of this whole matter expanding: “that anciently perceived likeness between all creatures and the earth of which they

are made. For as common wisdom hold, like speaks to like" (Berry, 1983, p. 76). Breathing room comes when we let these be "of a kind" and don't close this down with identity/difference. Here, too, this way of thinking about early literacy becomes an analogue of something kind-of ecological – relations, the living character of gesture and imitation and love and how toddling body expressions and sounds get caught up in the whirlwind of language. Him imitating my motions and me his. Us shushing each other over the Ravens at the birdfeeder. He is "reading the world" with lush complexity and, this is important: reading threads of it that go far beyond *my own* immediate notice and that *summon me* to notice. Part of early literacy is allowing myself to remember the fullness and letting myself enjoy the elaborateness and beauty and sillinesses that follow and join in, speaking, listening, pointing, looking laughing. And, as per the origins of the word "school," "holding back" (*Online Etymological Dictionary*, under "school") so as not to swamp these in-betweens with my own exuberances. But then, too, not simply always holding back and "abandoning the child to his own devices" (Arendt, 1969, p. 196) but then sometimes *doing exactly that*. Looking for the proper measure. "We seek the right word" which may be silence. Teaching and learning are odd and contingent tasks, always. We err, and forgive and err again.

Of course. Grandpa's old memory and the flip-throughs and my needing to hold back and shut up and enjoy how the "eloquent gestures" (Merleau-Ponty, 1972, p. 42) and sounds "fly up like sparks from a fire" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xiii). Me needing to shush myself and learning to love the exhilaration of doing so.

The fits and starts, now, of namings, and treating the naming carefully, graciously, as if it were fully formed -- the baa-baas are, yes, sheep as he points and we have fun with the sounds and watch a wee video of baa-baa beh-behs and ma-mas baa-baas bleating and leaping, with owls echoing in the background. Another painting from our regular "gallery walk" around the house that is one of his very favourites and that makes the video' hoots "*more compelling*":



"Feeling a Bit Curious." Anita McComas
(<https://www.anitamccomas.com/>) used with her permission

We've since both perfected the Barred Owl hoot as a sort of secret smile between us: who who whowho.

Thus, too with the neigh-neighs, as with his grabbing the tail end of our lovely huge dog Robin and his saying "neigh-neigh" which is, well, sort of right? Get it? Robin is so big, she's akin to a horse, kind-of, as the near-miraculous sorting of kinds proceeds, kindly, one hopes, forgivingly. It will sort itself out as the readings and re-readings – of books, of paintings, of the world -- continue. It does not bear towards fixity. It will remain "of a kind" even after all this is sorted –after all, I was still able to let all this "expand to its full analogous breadth of illuminative meaning" (Norris-Clarke 1976, p. 72), "call up the spectrum of different exemplifications, and then [repeatedly] *catching the point*" (Norris-Clarke, 1976, p. 67, emphasis original) when he neigh-neighed over Robin, as per a

description of how analogical thinking remains and abides in our language and our lendings. His living early literacy elaborates my own living literacy about early literacy. Of course. And I do what my own “hermeneutic” research temptations require: summon up ancestors that can help us on our way to not forget the myriad within which we live.

Like James Clifford. “Not ‘this is that’ but this is a story about that, this is like that” (Clifford, 1986, p. 100). Hence the arrival of my grandson provoking another old story about this:

THIS IS A STORY ABOUT THAT: Kin, hence kindred and Kinder and kindness and akin and the parallel Sanskrit root is gen, hence generativity and genitals and generosity [and that now old saw, “generative curriculum’]. Kindness and generosity, kindness defined as “natural affection.” (Jardine, 1992, p. 214)

My son, my grandson, knelt and bellied on a bed over a book, and this old me are, after all, of a kind, kin, drawn together by natural affection that itself needs tending and re-tending. Not identical. Not different. Not just a given but always “standing in a horizon of . . . still undecided future possibilities” (Gadamer 1989, p. 112). We all arc out into the air and the river (in press upwell) and the Ravens (from a town), into how all of this is our lending ourselves to the whole Earth’s kin in these “ecologically sorrowful times” (Jardine, 2015, p. xv; see Derby, 2015):

If we lose a sense of the interweaving “kinships” or “family resemblances” inherent in this child’s talk, we lose not only a sense of being at home with them. We also lose a certain kinship and sense of being at home with ourselves. (Jardine, 1992, p. 214)

The whole of the Earth, including how Raven’s peering in the window summon us to admiration and shushing each other, the child surrounded in my arms, us both snapped up like a whirlwind – now a sudden Blue Jay, “booday” -- tempted and taught within its beautiful internal articulations, all drift over the new painting of sheep that he can’t get enough of:



“Big Fleecy with a Wooly View” Kym Binns,
used with her permission

All this, only hinted at here, puts into lovey relief a passage I've clung to for decades and tried to not forget:

“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. Experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive [amassed] knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself (Gadamer 1989, p. 355).

There comes the great reversal. This young child proves to be experienced in precisely this openness to experience that makes possible experience itself. Or something like that. The oxygens cascade down now from the trees, another affinity experienced in our walks outside, like speaking to like, us swayed over to its side.

All this quite an early childhood education for me, all over again living in the midst of early literacy. A reminder of openness to experience made possible by his experiences. This too is an old tale, of an old man having something of his life lent back by young arrivals. This is a tale about that, too.

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