

“Hands at Your Sides!”

The Severing of Body and Mind in the Elementary School

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Body am I, and soul—thus speaks the child (Nietzsche in Grosz, 1994, p. 127).

With Cartesian models of things...nothing resonates; nothing follows the grain of the created human embodied psyche: To build bombs, it is useful; to build boys [and girls], it is not. (Chojnowski, 2002, np).

I BLAME DESCARTES. While I cannot guess his response if he were to see how his cold November dreams have impacted the way we *enlightened* humans live our lives today, I wonder (and wish): why couldn't he have kept those dreams and subsequent thoughts to himself? In mulling over the meaning of his catalytic dreams, Descartes doubted. He doubted the existence of embodied entities, and so put the *value* of those entities in doubt as well. Descartes' dreams led him to believe that while he could be sure of nothing else about his existence—not able to prove even that he has hands or a body—he was quite certain that he had thoughts and reason:

I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, the colours, figures, sound and all other external things are naught but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity; I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things (Descartes, 2005, p. 45).

In centuries since, the Enlightenment has influenced human endeavors via a dualistic mind-body logic that has led to a dominant Western paradigm of a linear, measureable world constructed and defined by a rational consciousness that is “unfettered by the body” (Boler, 2002, p. 332). Grosz (as cited in Springgay, 2008) explains that, inherited from Cartesian thought, the body, as inside, is separate from the world (outside). This “splitting objectifies, classifies, and orders existence, privileging one...over the other” (p. 23), so that it is “the body that must be over-

come...if one is to achieve the ‘God’s eye view’...unclouded by human passions, feelings and emotions...intellection unsullied by the presence of the body” (Shapiro & Shapiro, 1995, p. 52). As human experiences are reduced to quantitative descriptions and de-contextualized models of reality are presented as fact, it becomes clear that Descartes’ legacy informs much of our way of living well past the time of its intended liberating effects. As Jardine (1993) writes, “education in general and our culture as a whole are caught in the sway of this age-old logic of dismemberment and disintegration” (p. 52). In a Cartesian privileging of mind over body, it is apparent that the institution of school has embraced a “rejection of the reliability of sensation as a foundation for understanding” (Chojnowski, 2002), and has adopted the Cartesian notion that rational consciousness is “not dependent on the body...the thinking self is autonomous, isolated from other selves and bodies” (Boler, 2002, p. 332). As a person who has spent much of her life in schools—as student, as teacher, and as researcher—I have carefully attended to and worried over interactions and structures in schools that perpetuate this duality.

Keeping children apart—apart from nature, apart from the material world—and especially apart from one another—is an overt mechanism of school. Spend time in an elementary classroom, and you will hear, “Keep your hands to yourself,” “Mind your own business,” “Keep your eyes on your work,” “Don’t touch,” and “Put that down!” Children are placed behind desks, on chairs, in lines, and under one’s thumb. Manifestations of the body, its unpredictability and messiness, are resented as principals bemoan the effort it takes to control children during the “worst” times of the school day: Lunch, restroom visits, and recess (in schools where recess remains). Later in this paper, I will share school practices that reflect this rage for order and the resilience of children as they continue to live as bodied, minded, and spirited beings in “that hardy realm which Descartes banished” (Chojnowski, 2002, np).

Children are not the only ones who seek experience in that hardy realm. While Descartes (1955) would claim any substance “an existent thing which requires nothing except itself in order to exist” (p. 255), Dewey’s philosophical inquiry led him to twist and turn this modern rationalism and, in his work, affirm that “objects must conform not to the ‘mind’ but to a world of human encounters and engagements” (as cited in Ryan, 2002, p. 5). Merleau-Ponty (1968) also argues this point, suggesting that, “to comprehend is not to constitute in intellectual immanence, that to comprehend is to apprehend by coexistence” (p. 188). Springgay (2008) considers the possibilities for interactions between bodies as “inter-embodiment,” experience is not external to the body, but *is* bodied, and so, experience and knowledge are “entangled and interconnected” (p. 23). Bakhtin, too, opposed the idea of a disconnected/disentangled duality. In explaining that to be human is to be “interhuman,” that dialogue is everything, Jung (1990) writes that Bakhtin objected to both “‘I own meaning’ and ‘no one owns meaning’ and opt[ed] for the middle way: ‘we own meaning’—His idea of dialogue of self and other as *we*...are irreducible to each other” (p. 88). Mirroring Ellsworth’s (2005) notion that “to be alive and to inhabit a body is to be continuously and radically in relation with the world, *and* with others, *and* with what we make of them” (p. 4), Dewey’s *encounter*, Merleau-Ponty’s *coexistence*, Springgay’s *inter-embodiment*, and Bakhtin’s *dialogue* serve to reintegrate the dismembered self not only with “other,” but also with all of the selves represented in body, mind, and spirit.

Some educators discuss the “whole child,” as if considering the needs of the body and spirit will serve the mind. It is more than that. The body, the mind, the spirit live *in* the child *and* in the *interaction* of the child and all else his world has to offer. Kovel (as cited in Huebner, 1995) defines spirit as what “happens to us as the boundaries of the self give way” (p. 16). In Buber’s

(1958) words: “The development of the child’s soul is connected indissolubly with his craving for the Thou...he gains his world by seeing, listening, feeling, forming. It is in *encounter*”:

Often, appropo of no matter what, a drop of water, a shell, a hair, you stopped and stayed motionless, eyes fixed, heart open. The object you contemplated seemed to encroach upon you, by as much as you inclined yourself toward it, and bonds were established. (Flaubert, as cited in Hillis, 1999, p. 4)

Reaching out and Digging in— The “Human, Humorous and Humble” Nature of Encounter

People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth (Hanh, 1999, p. 12).

Let the myriads of Cartesian Men have their “mastery of nature.” For us, it is hard to love the gas station that stands on the spot where the lilies once grew (Chojnowski, 2002, np).

It is perhaps an impossible hope that we can recover our humility, our humanity, our humus, our living place on Earth (Jardine, 1990a, p. 218).

From infancy, we learn about the world by *being* in it: touching, smelling, tasting, watching, listening, manipulating, wondering, and trying. I have rich memories of developing my own sense of the world as I slid down steep and roughly-pebbled dirt hills; stroked my dog’s soft ears; licked the icicles I pulled from the chilled eaves of my house; studied clouds drifting above my head as I rested belly up on the damp, fresh-smelling grass; and enjoyed the sound and feel of my grandpa’s chuckles deep in his chest as he responded, “Who’s there?” to my never-ending litany of knock-knock jokes. I remember *trusting* my sensory encounters with the world, and so experienced with enthusiasm the joy and wonder of those interactions and what they taught me. While Descartes’ *I think* demands that we doubt the body and so the truth of what it might have to? tell us, Miller (2006) claims the opposite, that the body “fights against lies with a tenacity and a shrewdness that are properly astounding” (p. 21).

While modern, enlightened institutions such as schools embrace the arrogance of *cogito ergo sum* as “separate from the earth and severed from any sense of earthly embodiment” (Jardine, 1993, p. 51)—others suggest a more earthy, more humble existence. In his *...Reflections on the Humus Pile*, Gilbert (1996) joyfully shares his father’s humorous reference to the humus pile in his garden: “...he often referred to it as the ‘humanist pile’” (np). The dialogue and encounters Gilbert experienced with his father, with their gardens, with the earth—led him to ponder the “apparent etymology of the words *human*, *humor*, and *humility*” (np). He equates the humble contribution of humus to the garden’s fecundity to a generous willingness to serve. In this way, the notion of humility as equated with “poverty, need or lack” is disrupted and happily replaced with Gilbert’s claim that the root similarities of “humus and humanity touches on what is best about us, [including] our ability to give without expectation of reward, but with the confidence that our giving is a valued contribution.”

I consider my own time in the “garden” as a child. I recall my attempts to “dig to China,” and how carefully I attended to the changes in the earth as I dug deeper: darker, wetter, the smell no longer just dirt, but of the damp and the decay. As the soil changed, I dug faster, sure that I was getting closer to the ocean. Worm casings, beetles, potato bugs, rhizomes: Just like words, these were “naked corpses” (Bakhtin, 1968/1984) until made alive in the “we-ness” of acted dialogue. As I dug, the soil became more active with life and death—it felt more real, more profoundly earthly as I dug in. I was happily engaged in what Bakhtin would name “grotesque realism... [in which] the bodily element is deeply positive... opposed to severance from the material and bodily of the world... [and in acknowledgment of] the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin, 1968/1984, p. 19–20). While fully engaging in a “counter-aesthetic emphasis[ing] a collective body, [and] the simultaneity of birth, growth, and death” (Weinstein & Broda, 2009, p. 764), my knees became grimy with embedded soil, and my fingernails broke and fell into the hole I created.

My mother was torn. When I arrived home each evening at dusk, she lamented over my pastel shorts, no longer pink; but she also enquired about my progress and how many beetles and worms I encountered. She *swaddled* me—hoping for sanitized safety—but not too tightly. In caring for children, adult-dominance and control via swaddling (Leafgren, 2009a) emerges from a desire to protect; but in practice, swaddling, wrapping our children tightly in the security of safe structures, and sterile spaces, also separates them from embodied encounters. In worrying over the filthiness of encounters with soil, and so wrapping children in swaddling words of “Don’t get dirty!” and “Cleanliness is next to Godliness,” and rebukes to be “presentable,” adults seek to protect them from the dangers of grubbiness that is both unhygienic and unseemly. Concomitantly, these same verbal swaddlings bind children from what Chojnowski (2002) refers to as the rich tradition of interacting with the “soft, bitter, pungent, melodious aspects of the natural world” (np); and from what Richer (2005) celebrates as the wonderful possibility of “getting in touch with dirt [as] getting in touch with reality, in all its messiness and danger ... [while he worries that] in searching for an ever more sanitized and safe world, we lose touch with the real world” (np).

The Rhizomatic Nature of Swaddling and the Lost Encounter

Swaddling quietly constrains via unchallenged “norms, decisions and social practices” (Giroux, 1983, p. 59) that serve to not only to protect and *control* (and keep clean)—but also serve to “prohibit the ‘vivid and highly charged’ interactions with others? [and with the] environment” (Leafgren, 2009b, p. 843; Mead, 1951). As adults wrap or bind babies in swaddling cloths, they do so for multiple purposes. One swaddles a baby to protect the infant and to keep it close. Women in many cultures carefully swaddle their infants in order to keep the child safe, secure and as close as possible, sharing warmth, breath and heartbeat. Swaddling in this manner allows the child to participate in the day-to-day doings of the mother—to observe what she does, and to feel cared for in the most fundamental sense.

However, the “very connective forces that allow any form of life to become what it *is*—territorialise—can also allow it to become what it *is not*—deterritorialise” (Colebrook, 2002, p. xxii). While the practice and act of swaddling may come about as an act of care and concern and as a practice of security and control, the consequences of the act include a muted, disengaged experience with one’s world (Leafgren, 2009a, p. 843). A rhizome doesn’t begin and doesn’t end,

but is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*...the rhizome is the conjunction, “and...and...and” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25). Swaddling protects *and* controls *and* binds *and* forms *and* comforts *and* restricts *and* deprives *and*...

As Mead (as cited in Leafgren, 2009a,) described swaddling practices in long ago Russia: “Hands that were tightly bound inside the swaddling bands could not explore...never touching the teeming, vivid, highly charged world around it, being in it, but not of it” (p. 35). Further tactile deprivation emerged in the practice of keeping infants in bags of sand in certain rural areas of northern China.

This practice, which may last from one to five years, saves on washing and keeps children out of harm’s way...it is reminiscent of the 18th century European custom of bundling a baby in swaddling cloths, wrapping its head in compresses and then hanging it from a nail on the wall while its caretaker got on with other work. (Handyment, 1995, p. 3).

Rousseau (1979) discussed swaddling in his famous text, *Emile*: “A child unswaddled would need constant watching [and children]...left free would assume faulty positions and make movements which might injure the proper development of their limbs.” This aligns with school swaddling, which is both a means of control and, ostensibly—given concerns about bullying, focused achievement, emotional and physical safety—for the child’s own good (Leafgren, 2009a). Too often, though, the care becomes what it is *not*—it *deterritorialises*—and is about meeting the needs of the systems put into place, about ease for the adults in enforcing those unexamined and unchallenged “norms, decisions and social practices.” And so, children learn quickly and thoroughly to gauge adult expectations, and learn about themselves in the process: “Kids are taught to control and regulate their bodies in ways acceptable to adults. But more important, as kids grow up the body ceases to be acknowledged as a primary tool for mediating relations with the world” (Nespor, 1997, p. 122). Buber cautions that nurturing the spirit-self is not passive or restrained, but that the “human child...gains his world by seeing, listening, feeling, forming. It is in encounter that the creation reveals its formhood; it does not pour itself into senses that are waiting but deigns to meet those *that are reaching out*” [emphasis mine] (Buber, 1958/1970, p. 76). Reaching out implies that one has freedom to do so—that one’s hands are not tightly wrapped, literally or figuratively, to one’s side. Consider an infant *unswaddled*—hands reaching out, exploring self in the context of the world. “The process of being educated is always a consequence of encountering something that is strange and different, something that is not me. That which is ‘other’ and strange can be part of the I. In the infant the ‘other’ is the hands” (Huebner, 1995, p. 22).

The human hand best embodies the seeking, searching, and appreciative nature of touch. Hands present us with a reality of discrete objects, many of which can be picked up and examined for their form, size, weight, and texture. Hands are restless; indeed, it is tempting to speak of them as curious. Children feel impelled to touch; for them, touch is a primary method of learning. (Tuan, 2005, p. 75)

When considering the consequences of the body-mind duality and the unarticulated institutional severing of self from encounter, there is a loss to be deeply mourned. I think of Nietzsche’s weeping apology to the coachman’s poor abused horse in Kundera’s (1999) *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: an apology for Descartes’ error that ultimately allowed for the

beating to occur. Kundera documents Nietzsche’s tearful embrace of the horse as a moment of madness. But, I think it also represents a moment of clarity. Our dismemberment with the Earth and with one another *should* be mourned and be *warned*—as David Jardine (1990a) does here:

As we sever our connections with the Earth, it ceases to be our abode and...as the Earth loses its living generative character, the subject loses its humanity by losing the connectedness with the humus out of which it has emerged. One might say the subject loses its humility, its Being-in-the-world, its sense of having a place on Earth...Our lives, the lives of our children, the life of the Earth, become well-lit, enlightened, presentable, clear, univocal, like thin veneer whose surface is unambiguous, shiny/reflective, clean, without depth—bodiless, sexless, ghostly, empty, shallow products. (p. 215–216)

Rage for Order: Dismembering the Child

The ordering principle of the universe will never be found in the laws promulgated by senates or congresses or deputies [or in the classroom rule of Keep hands, feet and other objects to yourself] (Gilbert, 1996, np).

A friend of mine, a fellow teacher, once told me of criticism he received from colleagues at his school. It happened at the end of a school day early in the year, a day of small moments and big events—a day in which his kindergarten children were just getting to know each other. As my friend was alone in his classroom—pushing in chairs and picking up crayons dropped to the floor—two fellow teachers stuck their heads in the door long enough to say, “Boy, Dan, your kids are already out of control this year!” and “Especially those boys—the laughing ones!” Dan had walked the children out to the school doors that day, and did not remember any instances of “out of control” behaviors, and so inquired further. He reported to me that the children his colleagues had labeled “out of control” were three kindergarten boys happily laughing and *skipping* in the hall, two of them holding hands as they left the school building to go home after their first day of kindergarten.

I worry that, by now, these three boys have learned better. I worry that these three boys are now “in control” of themselves, and may not be laughing, or skipping, or holding hands any more. I worry along with Jardine (1992) that schooling

begins with an implicit, unvoiced repudiation of [the messiness, earthiness, joyfulness, verve, *presence...of*] childhood...[I worry that] such a repudiation might make it possible to render children into controllable, predictable and manageable *objects*, and ...rend the tenuous, ambiguous threads that make children our ‘kin,’ our ‘kind’...in the name of a Reason able to act without the guidance or hesitation of any sense of “kindness.” (p. 31)

I worry that Dan may, by now, be “under control,” and “Reason able” and so, believing that children who laugh, giggle, skip, or *touch* should not be doing so.

Structures of Tactile Deprivation

Just as human beings adopted routines and rituals to domesticate their environment, they also invented routines and rituals to domesticate themselves and their successors (Hamilton, as cited in Quinn, 2001, p. 130).

Skin bears the content of our lives (Dworkin, 1987, p. 25).

Routines, rituals, and structures persisting in elementary schoolrooms, hallways and playgrounds actively reflect the antiquated product of Descartes’ nightmares. As we reasonable and enlightened human beings seek to school/domesticate our successors, we do so by inventing ever more specific, minute, and constraining structures and routines (e.g., Foucault, 1979). Teachers carefully arrange the time and space elements of the classroom toward separating and controlling the children and their bodies. In becoming domesticated with hands tightly swaddled, children

become alienated from their bodies and desires [as the routines become them, and they become habituated to]...the American kindergarten’s daily routine of worksheet activities alternating with learning-center times, snacks and recess [which] imitates and anticipates the adult cycle of pleasureless work broken up by packaged pleasures in the form of shopping expeditions, coffee and lunch breaks and vacations. (Tobin, 1997, p. 18)

But first, the routines and structures must do their work.

In preparation for writing this article, I extended my personal observations of school structures by looking online for information related to public versions of school rules and handbooks. Prior to committing this online search, I have spent time in at least 100 different preschool-grade 5 classrooms in seven U.S. states and in six countries outside of the U.S. In nearly every one of them, I have noted on the classroom and school walls some variation of this rule: *Keep hands, feet and other objects to yourself*. I decided to use this rule as my Google-mantra in seeking virtual visits to schools outside of my personal experience. When Googling, “hands feet objects elementary” I found “about 131,000” results on the main page. I randomly opened pages from schools in 22 American states and looked for school (classroom, hallway, lunchroom, and restroom) rules. These findings are represented here:

- Students at our school must keep their hands and feet to themselves at all times
- Keep your hands, feet and objects to yourself and off of the walls
- Keep hands, feet and all other objects to yourself
- Keep hands at your side
- Keep hands to yourself at all times
- Keep your hands, feet and other objects to yourself (KHFOOTY)
- Body parts remain by your side
- Keep appropriate space between you and your neighbors
- Students should RESPECT the work displayed on the walls and keep their hands at their sides and not touch the work
- Hands-Off Policy
- Respect personal space of others
- Maintain/Respect personal space
- Line with hands at their sides, not touching others
- Stay in your space
- Rule of 2 (2 hands to your side, 2 feet on 2 tiles)
- Stand in line 2 tiles away from wall
- Walk with a purpose
- Be an outstanding learner in the hallway
- Walk at all times
- Walk in a single file line
- Enter quietly and in a straight line
- Walk silently.
- Always walk to designated area
- Walk to the right at all times
- Remain seated until prompted to move
- Walk to the right.
- Children should walk on the right side of the hallway in a tight single file
- Stay in line in the same order as you enter.
- Walk silently
- Silence
- Voices off
- Eyes forward
- Look forward
- Lips only touch [food]
- Eat only your own food
- No bag popping, table hopping or taking more than one straw

- Shirts tucked in, pants/shorts with belt buckled at natural waistline.
- You control you!
- No Touch Policy*

**No Touch Policy—Students are to keep their hands and feet to themselves at all times. This includes...public displays of affection, horseplay, pushing, shoving or bumping into each other. Dependent upon the severity, No Touch violations can be minor or major violations of the school discipline policy ([http://www.meridianschools.org/Students/StudentHandbooks/Documents/10_11_Elementary_Handbook_Final\[1\].pdf](http://www.meridianschools.org/Students/StudentHandbooks/Documents/10_11_Elementary_Handbook_Final[1].pdf)).*

While perusing the school websites, I found nothing to disrupt the impressions derived from my personal experience in schools as participant and as observer. I would venture to say that variations of the rules listed above are likely to be found in most elementary schools in the United States. I purposely included variations of similar rules (or “Positive Behavior System” mandates), such as “Keep hands, feet and all other objects to yourself” and “Students must keep their hands and feet to themselves at all times,” to demonstrate the ubiquity of these kinds of rules. Yet, when talking with classroom teachers about their posted rules, most report, as if unique to their classroom, that these rules were *written by the children in the class*. I do not disbelieve the teachers, but it pounds home a particular truth that is frightening to consider: The message sent loud and clear to schoolchildren is that Descartes was right. If it is children who are suggesting that a worthwhile rule for living their classroom lives would be to keep all body parts to themselves, then they are clearly learning the implicit lesson of school as a place to separate their bodied selves from their schooled selves. “From birth, children construct themselves subject to the ‘civilizing’ controls of adults” (Elias, 1978, page #) and live under the ubiquitous school-room rule, *Keep hands, feet and other objects to yourself*. As Jardine (1990a) warns, “we are living out this disconnectedness and disengagement in the sphere of educational theory and practice in often unnoticeable and unvoiced way. We are silently living out Descartes’s dream-turned-nightmare” (p. 215–216).

The Disembodied Civilized School Body

In order to understand others, we must know them—be inside their skin (Hanh, 1990, p. 4).

That discourses of modernity seek to create productive, functional bodies—docile bodies—is well documented. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1979) describes in great detail policies of “coercions that act upon the body, calculated manipulation[s] of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour...Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (p. 138). Others have theorized similar notions of the body, including Grosz’s (1994) “inscriptive” approach—a Nietzschean, Foucauldian notion of the social body upon which “social law, morality, and values are ‘inscribed’” (p. 33); and Elias’s (1978) concept of a body “inscribed with culture,” molded by societies changing notions of normal or abnormal behavior.

In the discipline of the classroom, docile civilized bodies become produced as teachers determine where each child-body should be and what it should be allowed to touch and do. They dictate the children’s progression from what Bakhtin (1968/1984) describes as a “grotesque body,” one with “shoots and branches [and] all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies or to the world outside” (p. 315–317), to a “civilized body...an entirely finished, completed,

strictly limited body” (p. 320). Nespor (1997) named the civilized body as a “schooled body, one that stays silent, walks in line, keeps its hands to itself, and doesn’t get out of its chair and walk around the room” (p. 131). As Tobin (1997) noted, “The core of the problem is not that we are civilized, but that we have gone too far” (p. 17). He is troubled by the “waning of affect” in early childhood classrooms as we school our children into what Jardine (1990a) describes as “strange and silent objects” that can be managed and manipulated by the mechanisms of civilized order that render them, in effect, bodiless.

The Question of Recess

We are intent on improving academic performance and you don’t do that by having kids hanging on monkey bars (Canada as cited in Johnson, 1998, A1).

In the late 1990’s, ABC broadcast a wonderful cartoon on their Saturday morning line-up. It was called *Recess*. The key protagonists were elementary students living out roles imposed on them by a cartoon society that had, just as in real schools, a “long list of rigid values and social norms that impose[d] a high expectation of conformity upon all the students...[while the students tirelessly defended] their freedom against perceived threats by adults or social norms” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recess_\(TV_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recess_(TV_series)), 2010). At the time I was watching *Recess*, I was a kindergarten teacher. So, while I viscerally cheered on the big kids (big to me) as they sought to strike a “rational balance between individuality and social order,” I, a kindergarten teacher, was particularly intrigued that those radical-activist-fifth-graders—bold, emancipatory rebels that they were—quaked in fear when confronted with freedom as represented by the kindergartners. In every episode of *Recess* in which they appeared, kindergartners were depicted as wild—dirt-smudged, painted faces, ragged clothing, running, leaping, brandishing weapons, and emitting snorts and gibberish in place of words. In what may be interpreted as a nod to Descartes, the writers decided, in the case of the kindergartners, to sever mind from body, and to celebrate and fear the body, unfinished and uncivilized.

While the creators of *Recess* recognized recess as a symbol of freedom—“a time when the kids can express themselves and develop meaningful relationships” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recess_\(TV_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recess_(TV_series)), 2010), school managers have been busy rethinking the value of recess, play and *the body*. Beginning post-1983’s *Nation at Risk*, many city school districts eliminated recess from their school day, and some even built new schools in their districts without playgrounds. One Atlanta superintendent, Benjamin O. Canada was famously quoted (as above), “We are intent on improving academic performance and you don’t do that by having kids hanging on monkey bars” (as cited in Johnson, 1998, p. A1).

I am not so sure. Perhaps getting an alternative point of view is precisely what we need. Hanging from monkey bars, knees bent over the metal bar, blood flowing to the head and the world topsy-turvy, we might experience a Bakhtian moment when meanings are overturned, borders stretched and broken, and the body uncivilized and free to engage in contact with other people and things. In this upside-down world, the day would be a day of carnival (Bakhtin, 1968/1984). A day when, as Sutton-Smith (as cited in Nabhan, 1994) wishes, kids—perhaps not quite so tightly swaddled—would have more “smells, tastes, splinters and accidents” (p. 9). A day when, as Robert Coles (as cited in Polakow, 1992) wishes, children would be allowed to “simply play...to develop an occasional grudge, or even just to happen to get into a fight” (p.

22). A day when the machine-like structures of the playground would sprout with “shoots and branches” and become like bodies themselves and “all that prolongs the body” (Bakhtin, 1968/1984, p. 316), and link one part to the other to become a living, breathing spectacle of a creature interacting with the children joining its shoots and sprouts in climbing, swinging, sliding interaction. A day when children climb *up* the slide and do “fancy tricks” on it—upturning the rule listed below. A day when swings get twisted; “underdogs” are encouraged; and everyone holds hands connecting one swing to the next. A day when the grotesque returns “the body in its excessive splendor and thus resists the pedagogical tendency to abstract, disembody, depersonalize, and divide” (Weinstein & Broda, 2009, p. 764)!

In official life, as opposed to the carnivalesque life, things are righted and brought under control. One learns *quickly* what is expected and lets go of hands, and faces the “correct” way: From my first day of kindergarten to my first day of graduate studies in botany twenty years later, school was synonymous with staying indoors, out of touch with the most elemental aspects of life. Within my initial hour of formal education, I was yanked up by the shoulders and scolded for crawling behind a piano to curl up to sleep in a bookshelf. I had quickly come to the conclusion that Mrs. Wiltrout, the kindergarten teacher, was going to bore us simply by talking all morning long, so I thought I’d rest up for when she let us out for recess just before lunch. (Nabhan, 1994, p. 38)

What Nabhan (1994) likely discovered when he was let out for recess before lunch is that “playgrounds have become dominated by machinelike recreational equipment, structured games, and paved-over areas...play has become too domesticated and regimented” (p. 8). An online search of public postings of school playground rules and policies yielded specific examples supporting Nabhan’s description of domesticated “play”-grounds for children on school property. It appears that Mr. Benjamin O. Canada need not worry about hanging from monkey bars; it is doubtful that “hanging” from equipment would be allowed if the following excerpts of regimented American elementary school playground rules are any indication:

- One person at a time
- Allow for personal space
- Don't touch or push anyone else
- Avoid hitting, kicking or *touching* others on playground
- No "chicken fighting", ever
- Refrain from chasing, pulling and tugging at clothing, fighting (even "play fighting"), karate and judo
- Students must refrain from any games or activities that include pushing, tackling, or grabbing of another
- Leave dirt, stones, sticks, snowballs, rocks or other objects alone
- No throwing or picking up dirt, sand, woodchips, rocks, or sticks
- Do not pick up or throw anything other than a ball
- Stay away from the woods, tires, and hill and do not go behind the school
- No jumping off of any climbing equipment. Please climb down correctly
- Do not play with balls near fences, ditches or planted areas
- The tunnel is made to climb through. Do not sit or climb on top of it
- Do not climb on rock walls, fences, railings, ledges, dirt hills, or the column
- Students need to sit flat on the swing facing the school
- Students are not to make up additional rules regarding the game
- Walk quietly on the sidewalks
- Line up when you are called
- Line up to go across towards the hill on the orange bars, climb towards the equipment on the yellow bars
- Play fair and follow the rules
- SWINGS: Sit on swings, hands on chains. No jumping out of swings, no twisting or swinging sideways. Count 30 swings before your turn. Do not count if there is an open swing. Count backs are not allowed. No stretching or pulling on chair while swinging.
- SLIDES: Go down one at a time in a sitting position, feet forward. Wait until the person starts down before climbing the ladder. The bars under the slide are off limits. *No fancy tricks on the slide.* [⊗]

On one school's website, I found a five-page handbook dedicated exclusively to playground rules. Listed were rules for: Obstacle course (5 rules); chin-up bars (8); twirling bars (3); big toy area (6); rock wall (3); slide: (4); sand area (4); horizontal ladder/monkey bars (3); lists for each game area—jump rope, basketball, four square, flag football, and tether ball and the following list of rules for Swings:

When there are children waiting, they must stand in front of the person on the swing far enough away to avoid being kicked by the swinger. The first person in line counts to 30 (one count per swing) for the person swinging. After 30 counts, the person swinging must get off and it will be the next student's turn.

More:

1. Must swing in same direction
2. No jumping out of swing
3. One person swing at a time
4. No going from side to side or twisting in the swing
5. No pushing someone in the swing
6. No holding hands while swinging
7. No climbing of poles or standing between swingers
8. Grabbing feet, etc. is forbidden

(see http://www.svusd.org/hp_images/4787/D33114-playground%20rules%20-%2006-07.pdf).

As I read the “ceaseless proliferation of longer and longer lists” (Jardine, 1990b, p. 110), I had a momentary vision of the moment in the first season of *Recess* when Swinger Girl “went over the top” on the swing, passing into another “higher state of being,” and pondered how this lovely vision of freeing spirituality could exist in the context of those lists. In place of this vision, my mind's eye painted a picture of children playing at recess with their hands pressed tight against their sides, looking only forward, quiet footfalls, and keeping a force-field of prescribed personal space around them: A rather joyless vision. This humorless/humus-less vision would appear to be the least likely characteristic of a place for children—as articulated by Palmer (1998): “If we want to develop and deepen the capacity for connectedness at the heart of good teaching, we must understand—and resist—the perverse but powerful draw of the ‘disconnected’ life” (p. 35). And maybe allow ones self to “go over the top.”

Kept Apart, Keeping Ourselves Apart

The closing of the asking mouth and the shutting of the wondering eye lead eventually to the hardening of the responsible heart. (Huebner, as cited in Hillis, 1999, p. 12).

It seems in a number of schools around the country, the kids aren't allowed to hug...Last week, one of my students had to present her research paper. She's a bright kid...but she is very shy. I proposed we give her a round of applause in advance, just to loosen her up — so the kids sent up a tumultuous applause. Right in the middle of that, a girl with the perfect name of Grace leaped out of her seat, ran up and gave her shy classmate a hug. Should I have written her up? (Brown, 2009)

I recall the recesses I enjoyed with my kindergartners not so long ago. The children ran and

ran and ran, chasing, being chased, running from tree to tree and from swing to slide, and they would return to the classroom hearts rapidly beating, and breathing like locomotives. Transitioning to a quieter, calmer place together took some effort. We made this transition through breath and through touch. On many days, on returning to the classroom from recess, we gathered together on the carpet and breathed together—slowing the rhythm, matching one breath to the next. And on some days, we decided to feel the breath. Each child would lie down, resting her/his head on the tummy of the next child and feel the movement of the neighbor’s breathing. Connected one to the other, head to belly, the children *breathed* together and *felt* the rhythm of the collective breath. Peace. There are many reasons to touch. Touching—extended not only to touching one another, but to walls and objects; to soil, water, trees, and ants; and not only touching with hands, but with voices and personal spaces and breath. Touch reminds us we’re *here* and present and sentient, and alive and *human*. Touch can calm and comfort and excite and *teach*: “Engaging...with the experience of touch, a bodied curriculum materializes as encounters between bodies” (Springgay & Freedman, 2009, p. 234).

And yet, touch is too often forbidden in the place of school due to the “customary Western emphasis on the brute physicality of touch. The sense of touch, like the body in general, has been positioned in opposition to the intellect, and assumed to be merely the subject of mindless pleasure and pains” (Classen, 2005, p. 5). Those involved in setting norms of swaddled dismemberment do not seem to realize—or possibly care—that the consequences of imposition of these norms are the stagnation of the humanity and joy. It is for the “good of the child” that adults swaddle and so, constrain, protect, prevent, remove from one another and from the environment, the world. I watch children in classrooms and see their longing for one another, their desire to touch and be touched, to *feel* as well as *do*. And sometimes that longing stays with a child. Tommy Trantino—poet, artist, ex-convict, and once a child who longed for connection—composed a brilliant book, *Lock the Lock* (1972) years ago, writing from New Jersey’s death row. His lament of the disconnected nature of school resonates across the decades:

I liked to be around the other kids and I used to look at the sky out the windows of my classes and smile at the women across the street looking out of their prison tenements and sometimes we’d catch each other’s eyes but they hardly ever smiled back and sometimes I would wave to them but the teachers would always say VERBOTEN. People were being kept apart and we were keeping ourselves apart and we were all hurting like a motherfucker but no one was telling (Trantino, as cited in Leafgren, 2009a, p. 23).

Trantino notes “being kept apart” and “keeping ourselves apart”—both functions of the constraining order and normalizing function of the schoolroom, and while troubling that “no one was telling,” in his essays, he *did* tell. Via broken text and drawings of bodies dis/connected, Trantino signified a body unable to be “read in writing...[that] touching one another...is what makes [bodies] properly speaking bodies (Nancy, as cited in Classen, 2005, p. 6). There are children who are likewise resilient and who quietly or not-so-quietly resist the ties that bind their hands to their sides and apart.

Rules, Schmules: Children Reach Out Anyway

I [don't] want...to prepare [children] to take their obedient and accustomed places in the world...unless people become disobedient and unless people step out of line, the world continues in its old ways (Zinn, 2005, np)

Here is the good news: No matter the rage of order that leads to the rigid structures so pervasive in school, children still find ways to reach out and connect. Joy, silliness, hope, abandon, playfulness, and freedom are joined together in the body and spirit of the child, and flourish even in places where they ought not. In the hard-walled hallways of school, the giggles of children seem to reflect Gilbert's (1996) suggestion that:

All social constructions are but frail, weak, and finally ineffectual in face of the inevitable regenerative force and movement of the material life force, located ridiculously in the lower body stratum, call[ing] forth an irrepressible belly laugh...but a humbling realignment with the force of life that laughs at the meager attempts of human authority to impose its own order on things. (np)

In my office, I have baskets of photographs taken over the course of two decades spent in the classroom. One of my favorites depicts a visiting poet standing by chart paper while the children in this kindergarten class are mostly seated on the carpet, looking, pointing, speaking their ideas for the next line or rhyme. I say “*mostly* seated” because two students in the photograph are there, but not on the rug. Eddie is lying on the bare floor close to the carpet, on his back and looking straight up toward the ceiling and at his fingers laced together and held high above his face. On Eddie, lays Jamil. Jamil's body runs the length of Eddie's, his arms resting between Eddie's up-stretched ones, and his head resting on Eddie's chest, his face turned toward the other children and the poet. I love this photograph because it reminds me of the comfort and ease that Jamil and Eddie had with one another in that moment. I love it because even while they were not sitting “criss-cross applesauce, hands in your lap,” they *were* engaged with the poetry and contributed ideas. Sharing breath, sharing space, sharing touch, and physical space—Eddie and Jamil took part in the goings-on of the classroom.

It is moments such as these that have led me to see my work with children as spiritual: Jamil *connecting* with Eddie even while connecting with the words and ideas in the poem as being composed as a result of the children connecting with the loveliness of words in the context of their special shared space and time. In this sense, spirituality is *not* considered transcendent as being removed from or above what is grounded and solid, but “transcendent in the sense that it involves a way of being in the world where one is connected to other beings...and allows one to move from inward to outward action and to seek that which lies beyond ourselves” (Leafgren, 2009b, p. 843). As I watched the children that day—actively connecting with the *ideas* of discovery and thoughtful observation and how they could frame those ideas through putting words together in ways that were *magical*—I saw their transcendent *becoming* in the world, and so making a new world in which to be. Eddie and Jamil enjoyed a different experience, interacting with the ideas and words and the other children and the poet, while also being out of the order of even that transcendent event. Their positions—away from the carpet, supine, bodies-*not* to selves (*far* from it!)—were playful and, in a small way, carnivalesque. The position of their bodies disrupted the “colorless and prosaic monopoly of the established order...The dialogica of carnival intend *both* to *destroy* a “real” world and to *construct* a “possible” world at the same

time (Jung, 1990, p. 92) Or, as Jardine put it, a world “beyond what already is, a reaching to the new life around us” (1990b, p. 110). In my teacher’s mind, the “possible” world “beyond what already is,” became one in which children did not *need* to sit criss-cross-applesauce, hands-on-your-lap in order to connect with/reach out to the work of school.

Vivian Paley writes brilliantly insightful books about children. In one, *The Kindness of Children* (1999), she shares her astonishment at the generosity and wisdom of children. She explains how moved she became by the rabbi’s words, “*The moral universe rests upon the breath of school children.*” Paley recognizes what I hope “school” learns to see—that children have much to teach us. Paley (1999) writes:

If the need to know how someone else feels is the rock upon which the moral universe depends, then the ancient sages were right. This is surely what happens when children give each other roles to play in their continual inquiry into the nature of *human connections*. It is as schoolchildren that we begin life’s investigations of these weighty matters. (p. 58–61).

Perhaps in respect for the spirit of the child, new lists can be developed to hang on the walls of American classrooms:

- This school has *Yes Touch Policy*
- Reach out
- Hands away from your side
- Voices on
- Share breath. And lunches.
- Fancy tricks on slides encouraged
- Hang upside down whenever possible
- And my favorite, in honor of Swinger Girl: Go over the top (and find your higher state of being).

About the Author

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