

Living Inquiry

Me, My Self, and Other

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With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth....”

(Hanna Arendt, 1958, p. 176)

Uncovering Our Worldliness: A *Living Inquiry*

AS HUMAN BEINGS we belong to the world long before birth. That is, each of us is born into the course of a larger human story and existing timeline, place, culture, and family. This relationship between ourselves and the phenomenon of ‘the world’ was emphasized in the writings of Heidegger who argued that our everyday existence is essentially Being-in-the-world, a unitary phenomenon. We are never world-less. As worldly beings, we participate with/in existing day-to-day practices of a culture in a fairly transparent way and with, or possibly without, a felt correctness. Essentially, we are absorbed into the public context (the “they”) that in turn provides the intelligibility we draw on in making a life for ourselves. We do what comes culturally, what is fashionable, so to speak. Normative expectations and ways we imagine our existence are always already carried in our narratives and images and limit possibilities, arguably to the lowest common denominator. In *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger reminded us, lest we forget, that falling into the “they” in an undifferentiated way or inauthentic manner has the character of being lost. What are our choices?

As well we inhabit places on Earth with other non-human entities and things, which dictates our relationship with the natural world at large. That relationship hinges on whether we see ourselves as “integrally continuous” with the natural world or “contingently thrown into it” (Kohák, 1984, p. 8) as strangers needing to fend for ourselves at any cost, unaccountable to the consequences. On Earth we have surrounded ourselves with multitudes of human-made things we routinely consume and use as part of our daily experience. Everything that we come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of our existence. This human-made world of things and structures stands as a façade between nature and us and provides a sense of perma-

nence and objectivity. We walk on asphalt rather than earth; we see artificial light rather than stars; we hear machines rather than birds. Our estrangement from and covering-up of the natural world is part of our everyday experience. Again, what are our choices? How do we begin to ‘uncover’ the impact of our worldliness to see what lies underneath? How do we suspend our conceptions of nature as provider for what we consume, and as furnisher for what we build? How do we recover from Being-lost in our own social imaginary?

I believe we do what Kohák proposes: “Look to experience with a fresh eye, taking as our datum whatever presents itself in experience, using the totality of the given as the starting point...” (1984, p. 22). My ongoing interest in such awareness of everyday living, seeing my world with a fresh eye, prompted me to develop a course intended to inquire qualitatively into the structure, content, and movement of daily life (Meyer, 2006). What I had in mind concerns being in the world but also what constitutes our belonging in the world, our worldliness. I named the course *Living Inquiry*.

Living Inquiry as Pedagogy

First of all, the course is not teaching *about* inquiry. It constitutes a practice of inquiry. The horizons of inquiry are our everydayness and our immediate participation in daily life. Week to week we share our inquiries in small groups. Each member of the class brings to the conversation a particular context, experience, and perspective to be spoken, heard, and exchanged. A second prompt for developing the course, was the great fortune I have had teaching in graduate programs with a large number of international students as well as with teachers who work in urban schools that have a high density of cultures and languages. My thought was that a fertile curriculum would emerge within the shared investigations of the narratives, histories, and realities into which we were born and now live and work. I imagined the curriculum engaging, for example, the lived/living experiences and stories of subjects such as colonialism and its impact, the liminal space between cultures and languages, what constitutes ‘home’ and belonging, and perceptions of the movement of time. I decided on four existential themes common to all of us to initiate our study of daily life: *place, language, time, and self/other*.

We begin by asking the question, *where* am I? Attention to *place* as inquiry heightens our senses to both the physical and social textures of our surrounding environment, natural and artificial. Life takes place somewhere. Place is where we go, where we find ourselves, and where we live and ‘belong.’ It is the background and context of our memories—a house, a neighborhood, a city, or some part of the world where we’ve traveled. Place concerns home, as well as displacement and exile. In the book, *Altogether Elsewhere*, Edward Said writes about exile and home: “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (1994, p. 137). Self and place are inextricably connected as are identity and home.

Attention to *language* unveils its expanse in our lives as the medium in which we think, express ourselves, and interpret the actions and speech of others. Language labels things and people; holds our traditions, stories, and histories; binds us to each other and leaves us misunderstood; and makes the world, with all its absurdities, intelligible and sometimes poetic. We are language beings. We understand and speak a language by living it. That being said, language is also slippery, vague, and loaded with hidden meanings and beliefs to be interpreted and decoded. It includes not only the spoken, but also the unspeakable, and the silence of the unsaid. “Nothing that is said has its truth simply in itself, but refers instead backward and forward to what is

unsaid” (Gadamer, 1976, p. 67). But too often we are bound to the said and what constitutes the rein of the speakable.

Time takes us to the horizons of past, present, and future in relation to the temporality and finitude of our lives. We reflect, attend and imagine there. In any given moment, time can appear ahead of itself, or having been. Chronological time appears straightforward, structuring our lives, and never waiting for any of us. It’s more complicated when we ask, what *is* time? There’s a glitch in the matrix. In our hectic lives, time isn’t as reliable as clockwork; sometimes it drags on, other times it flies by. Merleau-Ponty (1962) said, “Time presupposes a view of time. It is, therefore, not like a river, not a flowing substance. . . . It arises in *my* relation to things” (pp. 411–412). So it seems, our pocket has two watches, one that beats true and steady and one that beats according to what’s going on with our moods or circumstances.

Strangely enough, each of us is at once both *self and other*. We share the sameness of being human in a way that none of us is the same as another. Still, we lack a human culture that reveres difference. In his book, *Credo*, social activist William Sloane Coffin reminds us: “Diversity may be the hardest thing for a society to live with, and perhaps the most dangerous thing for a society to be without” (2004, p. 34). As inquiry, the *self/other* theme has a critical edge with respect to relationships. It brings discriminations before our eyes that otherwise happen behind our backs. ‘I observe how I observe others.’ Belonging to the world means sharing otherness with every one and every thing there is. ‘Other’ includes non-human entities as well as ‘things.’

As participants of the shared inquiry, each of us in the course chooses everyday contexts or situations for attention related to one of the four themes, and each prepares to share weekly fieldnotes that reflect these attentive experiences in small groups. Fieldnotes become the content of the course. A fieldnote is like a ‘sketch,’ or an expression of an individual inquiry and can take a variety of forms, such as a written text, a performance, a photograph, a poem, or a piece of original music. In addition, we each choose several books to read as provocative background for our conversations and inquiries. Hence discussions of our fieldnotes draw from a variety of perspectives, including fiction (and film), creative non-fiction, theory, and philosophy. The final field studies include the collection of fieldnotes and an interpretive rendering or performance of our individual inquiry, our glimpses into the movement, structure and significance of daily life. These final interpretations are often very creative and unique. They become the highlight of the course when we share them in the final weeks.

I’ve taught this course many times with graduate students at a university, with practicing inner-city teachers, and on two occasions with grade six/seven students at an elementary school (in a slightly modified version). With graduate students, the course means creating a space within their scholarship for inquiry into their *own* social and physical realities, common practices, expectations, and the deeper normative notions and imaginaries that lie beneath these expectations. *Living Inquiry* complements other graduate courses where students read and study about such topics through theory and philosophy. The diversity of students’ backgrounds, cultures, and languages allows for a rich shared investigation. As such, this kind of reflective and collective study brings close our everyday mode of being, which, Heidegger reminded us, usually “misses itself and covers itself up” (1962, p. 168). Furthermore, with respect to this community of beginning researchers, shared inquiries call critical attention to *who* we are as researchers in the academy, exposing our own biases and positions as researchers. It is critical that we understand and make explicit the politics and scholarship that underlie the decisions we make as researchers (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2003).

Within the community of practicing teachers, we focus our study on what it means to belong in a modern urban world. The intent is to develop a discriminating attunement and immediacy to our urban location and context and the subtleties of its structure. We examine and share our own interpretations and experiences of urban-ness in relation to our daily lives, our teaching practices

and the urban communities where we teach. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur writes:

A city brings together in the same space different ages, offering to our gaze, a sedimented history of tastes and cultural forms. ... The city also gives rise to more complex passions than does the house, inasmuch as it offers a space of displacement, gatherings, and taking a distance. There we may feel astray, rootless, lost, while its public spaces, its named spaces invite commemorations and ritualized gatherings. (2004, p. 151)

In urban environments, every neighborhood has a ‘public’ school. Teachers find themselves bound to the institution of school within the public world, which constitutes a reality that Arendt (1958) argued is seen and heard by everyone. In “The Crisis of Education,” Arendt much later writes about the role of school in transitioning the child from the locale of family to the world. “The teacher’s qualifications consist in knowing the world and being able to instruct others about it. ... pointing out the details and saying to the child: This is our world” (1977, p. 186). As a community of teachers, *Living Inquiry* constitutes inquiry into “knowing the world.”

Finally, working with eleven and twelve year old students over the school year was a privilege, particularly listening to their small group discussions around place, language, time, and self/other themes. The practice of attending to daily life appeared no more difficult for young adolescents than for graduate students. They relished the freedom of choosing their own contexts for inquiry and commentary as part of their fieldnotes. As pedagogy, I’ve found that *Living Inquiry* opens up what Natasha Levinson (2001) calls “Teaching in the Midst of Belatedness” (p. 21). In this sense, belated means ways young people find themselves in a world that has been built and discovered prior to their arrival, and finding themselves treated as if they’ve been ‘here’ before (p. 22). The role of pedagogy is not *only* to introduce students as newcomers to the world as *it is* but also to preserve students’ capacities to imagine otherwise, whereby imagination is a “legitimate way of knowing” (Bruggemann, 2001, p. x). *Living Inquiry* provides a space for young students to openly explore and begin to understand their own relationship with the world and, in doing so, conceivably push back the notion that they are always already determined and fated by it. One of the themes the students found most interesting and provocative was *Time*. One week, a student’s abstract painting, shared as a weekly fieldnote, sparked an intense discussion. The painting had an infinity symbol at the top of a large circular motif. The class debated whether or not time begins and/or ends. Discussions covered topics related to life, God, death, birth, scientism, the universe. Over two years, the teacher and I translated *Living Inquiry* into the culture of a school, one morning each week. A curriculum emerged, albeit qualitatively different from the planned curriculum of the rest of the week. Students’ fieldnotes were the curriculum.

A Living Inquiry

The following performs an example of *Living Inquiry*. I often share my own fieldnotes and inquiries with students. In this example, I take up the theme self/other based on somewhat ordinary events and moments, represented in fieldnotes, which stood out for me in subtleties between self and other. In these events, ‘others’ turn out to be things (*Other as ‘What’*), as well as human (*Other as ‘Who’*) and non-human beings (*Other as the Natural World*)—not surprising since we all share otherness with every one and every thing there is.

As I mentioned, each of us chooses several books for background reading to our *Living Inquiry* field study. Three philosophers inspired this particular *living inquiry* and provoked the following interpretations of my fieldnotes (also included): Hanna Arendt, Luce Irigaray, and Erazim Kohák. While I don't have a formal background in philosophy, reading both Western and Eastern philosophical texts provides large questions concerning human existence. In my reading of philosophy, it was Gadamer (1976) who convinced me that understanding isn't the avoidance of misunderstanding. We can welcome, he says, "that which promises something new to our curiosity" (p. 9).

Arendt's seminal book, *The Human Condition* (1958), provided insightful perspectives and distinctions concerning relationships between humans, and the 'thing' character of the human world. By proposing the simple and timeless question, 'what are we doing?' Arendt asked us to consider actions and speech between us that we take for granted and to reconsider the human condition from the vantage of our newest experiences and most recent fears. Irigaray's book, *The Way of Love* (2002), sketches a contemporary philosophy (the love of wisdom) "in the feminine" (p. vii) where the values of intersubjectivity, dialogue in difference, and attention to present life are recognized and raised to the level of wisdom (the wisdom of love). She focuses on the language of encounter. In *The Embers and the Stars, A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (1984), Erazim Kohák reminds us of what we have hidden from ourselves. On several occasions, colleagues who know my writing and interest in inquiry recommended his book because of its phenomenological writing and sensibilities. Kohák brings us to real moments and places, like fieldnotes, as contexts for philosophical inquiry.

The reflections following the fieldnotes represent exchanges that occurred between my three fieldnotes and these authors' writing (as well as a few others). Certainly, small group reflections around each fieldnote (what happens in the course) would be richer in breadth, with other experiences and other interpretations. A fieldnote is meant to be interpreted. However, my own reflections serve as examples of ways to pause in a text, in this case a fieldnote, and 'uncover' aspects of worldliness.

I. Other as 'What'

Fieldnote: The thing about China. *The bone china teacup that belonged to my grandmother lies broken in the stainless steel sink, not shattered but cleanly separated into several pieces. When my mother gave me my grandmother's collection of teacups and saucers last year, I committed the dozen or so to use, neither to be packed away in a box or collecting dust on a shelf. My modest apartment hasn't room for shelves of knickknacks. Maybe I lack any inclination to clutter its modern décor with such things. Besides, I love tea and these are real teacups, not coffee mugs.*

Teacups are shallow with wide brims meant to cool off hot tea quickly for sipping (as opposed to slurping, which my grandmother did not approve of). This particular teacup's rim and handle are painted with what looks like real gold. Its inside is tinted blue. The inner rim is lined with matching gold flowers, and a colorful bouquet fills the bottom. On the outside a small pedestal, also with a gold rim, joins the white cup. My decision to use the teacups meant just that, never minding if any one of them breaks. That is, accidental breakage shouldn't be tragic. Alas this cup gave me the slip and now I feel awful. Somehow it is tragic. I am, however, suddenly curious about this family artifact. What's its story?

The only facts I know concern its circumstances; the teacup belonged to my grandmother, Barbara, who was born in 1905 on a farm in Alberta and lived her adult life in southern California. As a child I saw many teacups in her home setting on side tables alongside glass figurines. There were countless unique things inside my grandmother's house. Outside, the perimeter of her house was lined with a row of matching plastic flowers stuck in the ground. While this gardening ploy sounds quite unnatural for a farmer's daughter, it represents the nature of my grandmother.

Barbara was a workingwoman, first employed during World War II as many women were. After the war ended, she continued to work outside the home until her retirement. Barbara didn't have time to take care of a living garden but took simple pleasure in digging in the dirt and planting a medley of colourful plastic, the new material on the scene. She told me once that when she was troubled, digging in the dirt resulted a grounded peace. "Mother Earth," she promised, "will take care of you."

Still curious about the teacup, I gather as much info as I can on the Web and make a few calls to some unimpressed antique dealers. The short story is the teacups were made between the 1930s and 50s. Lots were made. One teacup and saucer might bring in five dollars on EBay. This scenario reminds me of a set of 'crystal' goblets that belonged to my husband's mother. I looked after them for years, bringing the glasses out for special occasions and so forth until my sister-in-law told me they were from K-Mart. They went straight to a garage sale. Still bummed about my broken teacup, I attempt to superglue it together without success.

For days the teacup remains in pieces on the kitchen counter because I can't bring myself to throw it away. Instead I decide to bury the largest piece that has part of the rim and matching flowers in a planter box on my apartment balcony as a ritual. I pat down the dirt and feel a sort of grounded peace.

Reflection. Worldliness is belonging. We belong in a world of human-made things always already familiar, "ready-at-hand," and defined by social and cultural involvements. From birth on we learn about a massive amount of existing things and grow to be accustomed to the world of things through our immediate and ceaseless involvement. According to Kohák, "With the expansion of our technology, we have, in effect, translated our concepts into artifacts, radically restructuring not only our conception of nature but the texture of our ordinary experience as well" (1984, p. 12). He further argues that the world of artifacts covers the rhythms of nature and becomes that artificial layer that we confront in our daily experience.

It was over 50 years ago that Hanna Arendt made a significant and relevant distinction between things we 'consume' and things we 'use' based on the human activity involved in their production (labor or work) as well as their length of stay in the world. She proposed that labor ensures our survival, while work brings permanence to the "fleeting character of human life" (1958, p. 8) with its ever-recurring beginnings and endings, births and deaths. In terms of worldliness, things produced by labor are the least worldly but needed to sustain the life process itself; "their consumption barely survives the act of their production" (Arendt, 1958, p. 96). Things we consume, such as coffee in disposable cups, appear and disappear so rapidly and in such abundance that we hardly think about their means of production. Kohák argues, "Production itself has become the justification of ever more absurd consumption: we consume to produce, produce to consume; all other considerations must stand aside" (1984, p. 21). Products of work are things we use that inhabit the human-made world standing between nature and us. Arendt argued further that the human-made world would not be possible without things that stay,

like my grandmother's teacup, buildings, or the planter box on my balcony: "But without being at home in the midst of things whose durability makes them fit for use and for erecting a world whose very permanence stands in direct contrast to life, this life would never be human" (p. 135). Permanence in this sense provides and preserves an existing reality into which we are born as strangers. In short order, our adaptation is so complete that we naturally encounter things wrapped in our own concerns without noticing them explicitly. Kohák sees this adaptation as problematic: "The world of artifacts may make philosophic reflection impossible when it assumes an absolute ontological status and subordinates the moral subject to its mechanical order" (p. 24). It is difficult to be aware of the multitude of things in just one room, their assignments, origins and histories. In one glance across the room, we meet otherness in the "sheer multiplication of inorganic objects" (Arendt, 1958, p. 176). Unless you are reading this article in the wilderness, look up from the page and notice the number of things in your environment. Imagine what is hidden away in drawers and closets. The wooden door to that closet is no longer associated with a tree, but to its assignment as covering the closet.

There are occasions when things show up in our attention because their use is disrupted, and we find them unusable, missing, or misplaced. The broken teacup in the fieldnote for example is now out of the cupboard, so to speak, and the focus of curiosity and investigation. Heidegger made the argument about when things become explicit in our attention:

In a peculiar and obvious manner, the 'Things' which are closest to us are 'in themselves'; and they are encountered as 'in themselves' in the concern which makes use of them without noticing them explicitly—concern which can come up against something unusable. (1962, p. 105)

The teacup's rarity, its dated form and floral patterns announce it belongs to more than one worldly milieu, the world within which it was made and, because of its duration across time, the present world where it appears out of place alongside disposable Starbucks® coffee cups, like a vintage car still on the road sporting pointed fins. We notice it.

What I find more interesting is how the teacup touches a human story in a supporting role. For me, the teacup evokes the character of my grandmother herself—the woman who planted matching plastic flowers around the perimeter of her house, not unlike the teacup itself with matching flowers lining its rim. From this image, I am reminded of a passage Franc Feng (2003) shares about artificial flowers at his father's gravesite:

Signs of the real, and the absence of real are present. Here arises another quotidian pedagogical opportunity: To ask ourselves why it is important for being-within-the-more-than-human-world, to have these representations as semblances of the real? It is when we ask this question that we touch something deep within us. Fake flowers carry meaning for mortal beings who treasure life, who celebrate, long for, and mourn for others no longer in their presence; who care deeply for other beings who bring meaning in completing their meager lives. It is with moments of fragility that we find our greatest strength. Mortality attenuates our illusions of grandeur. It makes us ask ethical questions of being. (p. 234)

This relationship, between *what* and *who*, reminds me that while we live in a world of things, they are products of human activity and imagination. As Arendt pointed out, things are not heaps

of unrelated articles in a non-world, the “thing-character and the human condition supplement each other...” (1958, p. 9). Things are enmeshed in the web of human relationships that produces the stories of unique lives just as naturally as industry produces tangible things. Things themselves however are not the protagonists of stories. We hear about things in stories as possessions or belongings in the ‘world-of-who,’ which can stir particular memories of a place, a time, or a person.

II. Other as ‘Who’

Fieldnote: Wor(l)d on the street. *There’s no conversation or chat here on the street, only encounter between self and self and oneself and other. People I pass by show up as mere glimpses. Today I’m an aloof consumer on the street where He’s set up as storefront panhandler. I recognize Him never far from a shopping cart parked and packed with what matters for street living. The street after all is His home inside out. And to Him I suppose I’m just one of the many walking through it day after day, each to the other ‘what’ rather than ‘who.’ He and I stand worlds apart but close enough at this moment to nearly touch the distance. His deliberate position as doorman of the market assures we will meet face to face twice allowing me a second chance for generosity.*

Last week it was a young woman with her dog who set up here. I saw a man come out of the market with a huge bag of dog food and set it down next to her without saying a word. The whole scenario pissed me off because I couldn’t come to terms with his half-hearted gesture, other than he had a particular fidelity to dogs. Some days there’s the poet who recites for spare change or the windshield washer who catches the motorist at a red light or the vendor who sells The Street newsletter that has the weekly horoscope I like to read.

Today it’s the door man on the street in my path, whose familiarity disrupts my deliberate detachment. He offers a prepared but friendly greeting, now the spirit of our encounter rests in my hands. I return the greeting and enter the market feeling fully affected by his presence. The market sells pricey organic food for urban high-rise dwellers who choose cooking over fast food. Sandwiched between the universal fast food establishments on the same street are dozens of tiny ethnic restaurants that change ownership monthly but not furnishings. What distinguish each one are the mouth-watering smells of colourful cuisine, the sign out front, and the faded photos of specialty plates in the window. Likewise, the inner city itself shows signs of fast track transformation. Everyday small industrial buildings are torn down to make room for new expensive high-rises. The cement square near the train station where street folks and their carts gathered in the afternoon sun is gone. The city turns over. Yet again people are displaced.

Still, I find my way to the market for produce, fresh flowers, and the most delicious oversized cookies ever, which never happen to last the walk back to my apartment. Today I buy two. Neither goes in my backpack with the other groceries. Back on the street He and I meet again and I hand Him one of the cookies wrapped in a small paper bag. Though my mouth is chockfull, I manage to say with great passion, “These cookies are really, really good.” He doesn’t say a word but looks long at me with a curious expression. As I turn away and walk back down the street, I hear Him greet someone else.

Reflection. *Wor(l)d on the Street* takes us to a public place and an inquiry into who belongs there, and what goes on there between self (my self as narrator) and other. From the narrator’s initial outlook the individuals on the street become “glimpses” of flat characters—man

on the street, vendor, panhandler, windshield washer and such, depicting *what* they do rather than *who* he or she is. In any such case, distinctness of the other escapes us as “we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him” (Arendt, 1958, p. 181). When we elaborate sameness, we reduce difference to a shortfall. We presume the nature of his or her belonging and reality according to a stereotype: He belongs to the street as panhandler who asks for spare change. Instead of meeting the other as a glimpse into a living story, even in a brief moment, at best we integrate the other within the limits of our own knowing. We differentiate, hierarchize, homogenize, and exclude (Foucault, 1977).

At the moment of encounter, Irigaray (2002) proposes a clearing of that knowing, that one-way street of *a priori* assumptions and prescribed certitudes: “Silencing what we already know is often more useful in order to let the other appear, and light ourselves up through this entry into presence irreducible to our knowledge” (p. 165). Irigaray further proposes we find gestures, words or silent intervals that open nearness and proximity between us, which moves us toward co-belonging from positions that stand ‘worlds apart.’ “Preparing for an encounter cannot be reduced to covering the other with clothes, images, or speeches which render this other familiar to us, but requires finding gestures or words which will touch the other in his, or her alterity” (Irigaray, 2002, p. 151). The meeting of self and other requires “letting be” the other-as-other, respectfully. Arendt (1958) reminded us of the modern conviction that respect is due only where we admire or esteem. This she claimed constitutes “a clear symptom of the increasing depersonalization of public and social life” (p. 243). Not much has changed in public and social life since Arendt wrote those words.

Letting be means letting others be present as ‘who’ while speaking and listening to them and to oneself. Speech and action go on between us. It’s not so much what it is one will be able to say, but what constitutes “the domain of the sayable” within which one speaks at all (Judith Butler, as quoted in Salverson, 2008, p. 252). Irigaray (2002) argues it is critical that we touch each other in our language—a language that exchanges and safeguards the obscurity and the silence that is necessary in discovering proximity. She speaks of a standstill or silence that occurs when we face the irreducibility of the other. “Each subject must come to a standstill before the other, respect the irreducible alterity of the other” (p. 113).

In the fieldnote there is a change on the part of the narrator’s mood and actions, from ‘deliberate detachment’ to feeling fully affected by another, although circumstances on the street have not changed. There is no happy ending either, but an action has no ending we can foretell in the web of human relationships, nor can it be undone. Nonetheless, there is a momentary clearing, perhaps Derrida’s unconditional hospitality (2003), two people co-belonging on the street, a cookie exchange instead of a word exchange, a curious silence, a mouthful, a modest gesture where some thing worth caring about is offered to the other-as-other.

III. Other as the Natural World

Fieldnote: Canyon relief. *I stopped about half way to the bottom of the canyon, which was far enough for a day hike. Summer brought long days for exploring the beauty below the ridge, but it also brought the desert heat of the Southwest. I felt the urgency to be back at the top before sundown, four hours away. I was guaranteed more shade on the way back. I drank water and ate. When I started back up I felt panic about how far down I was, which made me speed up from switchback to switchback. I stopped at each turn to catch my breath. Not a good way to proceed. I spotted the girl I met at a rest point and her grandfather coming up the switchback*

below. She chattered at him, as she did to me earlier, but the grandfather never spoke. He had a tall walking stick that guided his slow and steady pace. The stick looked worn but strong and straight like him. His deliberate steps appeared to be well acquainted with deep canyon paths. I waited until the two passed me then followed a ways behind. His pace allowed me to breathe as I walked. My panic settled down. I came out of the canyon close to sunset where busloads of people were gathered to witness the colours of the canyon change. The sunset was stunning.

Fieldnote: Breath taking. Here at the island cottage there is no TV, Internet, or phone. I rent this modest place from time to time in order to write and study. The windows facing Sea and the southern Sky inspire me. This week my daughter accompanies me. I worry she will be utterly bored. The weather is rainy and grey. Much of our time is spent staring out the wall of windows toward Sea. In time, we are guaranteed to see Eagle, Otter, Raccoon, Heron, and Seal cross our view. They live here. We are guests. It is late afternoon; we have been inside all day. Suddenly my daughter launches out of her couch position and runs for the door yelling, “There’s a whale!” I grab the binoculars and run after her responding in a winded voice, “Oh, I don’t think so, they don’t come this close to shore, it must be a seal.” Fortunately my daughter ignores my pre-assessment. I continue to follow her down to the Beach and up a climb of rocks to the top of the shallow caves that border the shoreline. As I catch my breath, I hear the breath and see the curved back of a single grey whale. A magnificent tail follows. It is high tide. The water is deep enough for this bottom feeder to come close to the shore where my daughter and I watch frozen in awe.

Reflection. Our modern relationship with Earth and non-human life has become estranged. The human artifice of the world acts as a barrier between human existence and the natural world. Arendt argued that while Earth is the quintessence of the human condition, we constantly make our own self-made conditions in an artificial home on Earth. She added, “Whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence” (1958, p. 9). While the impact and irreversibility of heedless human action in the natural realm has been evident for some time, the end products of our artificial world continue to justify the means and resulting violence done to the natural world. Fifty years ago Rachel Carson wrote, “Only within the moment of time represented by the present century has one species—man—acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world” (1962, p. 5). In *Silent Spring*, Carson offered case after case of chemical assaults on the natural environment that contaminated air, soil, rivers, and oceans to levels lethal to human and non-human life. Some of us still remember those days running behind the truck that sprayed insecticide through the streets to kill bothersome mosquito populations. It was a naïve kid’s game that seemed harmless. It wasn’t. While such a reckless scenario sounds absurd in today’s world, we still run our lives behind the same naïve trust in others making decisions that impact the environment. According to Arendt, how we use our scientific and technical knowledge is a political question of the first order, not to be left in the hands of professional scientists or professional politicians. There is an alarming reminder in her words.

If it should turn out to be true that knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought have parted company for good, then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is. (1958, p. 3)

Kohák (1984) argues that the deeper problem is our forgetting, and of “covering-up of the moral sense of the cosmos and of human life therein beneath a layer of artifacts and constructs” (p. 26). He argues that bracketing and ‘seeing,’ of uncovering the “forgotten sense of the cosmos and of our lives therein” is the most urgent task of philosophy (p. 26). I believe it is the task that belongs to us all.

The more wonder and humility we have in the presence of nature, the less taste we will have for its destruction. This means stepping outside the artificial world where we have such a strong sense of belonging. In *Canyon Relief* there is humbleness in the retreat below the ridge of *humus*, Earth. To me, the grandfather appeared to have a kinship with the canyon and a pace that didn’t compete with his surroundings. In the end, many people showed up to attend the day’s end performance of Sun and Earth. In *Breath Taking* there is a sense of wonder and awe at the sight of a magnificent being in its natural habitat. Such a moment awakens in us a latent sense of belonging to Earth and to a larger community of life with which we are “integrally continuous.”

Final Reflections

“What are we doing?” Hanna Arendt’s simple question, written in present tense fifty years ago, points us still to the vantage of our newest experiences and recent fears, as does *Living Inquiry*, in reconsidering or looking at the human condition with a fresh eye. What do our actions and speech, which go between ourselves and others in daily life, tell us about our worldliness?

In this example of *Living Inquiry*, my inquiry into the relationship between self and other, when other is not human, highlighted for me what it means to be self-as-human in the world at large. We are makers. We value things. Our labor, work and “know-how” have manufactured a human world of things we routinely consume and use, and which are disconnected to their material source within our immediate attention, such as a disposable cup to a tree.

This constructed world with its intrinsic conditions provides a sense of permanence and belonging ‘outside’ the natural world. In cities, concrete and asphalt separate our feet from Earth. We are at home there. Yet, at times when we slow our pace and find our way back to natural environments, together again with other species that do not inhabit the human world, we demonstrate our capacity for humility, wonder, and awe that is deep and imperative.

Also in this particular *Living Inquiry*, I became more aware of what it means to be me, an individual, in the human condition of plurality—an *encounter between self and self and oneself and other*. Arendt reminded us of the paradox of human plurality: as humans we share the sameness of being human in a way that none of us is ever the same as another. We are each distinct. Hence our difference is irreducible to a perpetual mystery. Irigaray’s writing explores the proximity between, which does not appropriate or integrate the other into what one already knows. We use ability to see what is questionable. “It is in this respect of a mystery that we preserve in us for them that the other might take shelter” (Irigaray, 2002, p. 156). An encounter between self and other becomes an interstice, an invitation, and an improvisation.

While this essay includes an example of a *Living Inquiry*, what is missing in terms of the course is perhaps its most critical component, the sharing of everybody’s fieldnotes and inquiries that happens in small group conversations during every class meeting. These conversations constitute another deliberation of inquiry. Moreover, our choices for background readings are different and offer an array of lenses for interpretation. While the course follows a structure

according to the four themes, each group of people who have participated so far (graduate students, practicing teachers, and adolescent students) has made *Living Inquiry* a distinct learning experience. For me, the curriculum is an interstice, an invitation, and an improvisation that explores being in the world.

I am however left with the question, what is living inquiry? It is not a philosophy of life, a methodology to be followed, or an analytical tool. For me, it is simply an inquiry into how to live with the quality of awareness that sees newness, truth, and beauty in daily life. (Meyer, 2006, p. 165)

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