

IMAGINE

RADICAL LOVE ABIDES IN CRUEL UNFORGIVING TIMES

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Abstract

This essay discusses how, in this current historical conjuncture of cruelty, insensitivity, greed and technological obsessiveness, radical love, and listening can abide in education and in the global society. It engages these issues in three sections. First, the essay describes and explicates the current milieu in terms of the adoration of money, the paradox between the lack of community and the virtual communication obsession. It also delves into what can be considered the central political issue of our time, that of voluntary subservience. That is, why current corporate neoliberalism and microfascism continue despite efforts to contest them. Second, the essay discusses notions of hope from a critical autobiographical context and the ways in which hope is necessary for a pedagogy of radical love and listening. Third, the essay discusses education within the current context described and the ways in which radical hope, listening and love in critical pedagogy can abide in education and society despite the tremendous forces working against such education and thinking. The essay claims finally that commitment and abiding with criticality is radical love.

Keywords: hope, community, radical love, radical listening, abiding, voluntary subservience

“IMAGINE”: RADICAL LOVE ABIDES IN CRUEL UN-FORGIVING TIMES

Imagine no possessions, I wonder of you can? (Lennon, 1971)

If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you do not see. (Baldwin, 1989, p.154)

CRUEL AND UNFORGIVING TIMES

Perhaps what monsters like the golem are trying to teach us, whispering to us secretly under the din of our global battlefield is a lesson about the monstrosity of war and our possible redemption through love. (Hardt and Negri, 2004, p.12)

It is difficult to “imagine” teaching or living with hope, radical love and listening within the current historical moment. There is adoration/love, but it is the greedy love of money and possessions that dominates our society. It is, indeed, the time of casino capitalism. Giroux (2014) discusses the fact that CEOs like Lloyd Blankfein of Goldman Sachs deny that there is anything wrong with having too much money. This particular giant of casino capitalism:

...feels no remorse and offers no apology for promoting global financial crisis while justifying a bloated and money-obsessed culture of greed and exploitation that has caused enormous pain, suffering, and hardship for millions of people. (Giroux, 2014, p. 35)

It is a time of cynical community disconnectedness and overwhelming techno-connectedness. There is little human interaction or dialogue and tremendous almost constant virtual/technical obsessiveness. My students of the millennial generation try to convince me that texting, Instagram, Facebook, etc... are the same as face-to-face dialogue. They are not. Ironically millennials will complain about waiting for a minute or two for their latte, but will wait in line for hours for the newest iPhone. “I do not simply want an iPhone. I want to be seen and known as the guy with the iPhone” (Crane, 2013). People get online and post pictures of themselves. It is what Bauman (2007) called the society of confession. The purpose of all of the posts and photos is fame. Being famous, “being seen, noticed, talked about, and therefore,

presumably, *desired* by many” (Bauman, 2007, p. 13), is a goal in the corporate consumer society. In a society that has lost community, virtual fame may be the only way to become noticed. Ironically it makes people commodities. Within this existence the most radical activist issues can be engaged in a type of slacktivism.

Such forms of advocacy, particularly those related to social media, are often derisively referred to as “slacktivism” or “armchair activist.” These activities pose a minimal cost to participants; one click on Facebook or retweet on Twitter and the slacktivist can feel that he or she has helped to support the cause. (Seay, 2014, p. 1)

I am not against any of these social media(s). I use them myself. But where is the love for social justice, peace, and equity?

Indeed, all great movements for social justice in our society have strongly emphasized a love ethic. Yet young listeners remain reluctant to embrace the idea of love as a transformative force. To them love is for the naïve, the weak, the hopelessly romantic. (hooks, 2001, p. xix)

Despite recent protests such as the Million Mask March in London, marches against police violence in Baltimore, Lower Manhattan, Boston, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Minneapolis and Washington, in the present moment there is an incipient non-connectedness present in public schools, universities, and in society. One wonders, indeed, where is the love that raises critical consciousness? Community has been replaced by a type of vacuous techno-fetish and the neoliberal struggle to gain an approving nod from the corporate elites. Whether that nod is a good grade, an award, a raise or a promotion, it is ever-present. This hopeless culture of silence and acquiescence slithers through the corporate university. Many students and faculty have capitulated to the mindset of this hopeless, loveless, corporate behavior, a type of “intellectual chloroform” (McLaren, 2015, p.2). Particularly for faculty, job security becomes a process of not speaking up on issues and of losing the will to resist. With a lack of tenure track positions and the ever-increasing use of adjunct positions, university administrators tell faculty young and old that they should just

be thankful that they have a job. This insidious corporate mentality reigns. “The lack of job security further inhibits any propensity to write or speak about topics that have political or social relevance. It is better for one’s career to stay away from politics and wallow in the arcane world of departmental intrigue and academic gibberish” (Hedges, 2011, p.126). It is what Deleuze and Guattari name as the central political question (Buchanan & Thoburn, 2008 p. 7). It is the question and mystery of voluntary subservience.¹ Power operating is not simply a matter of “coercion or repression, the domination of one group of people by another... power requires a degree of complicity on the part of the ruled to function” (Buchanan, 2008, p. 14). Why is there this complicity? That is an issue that is beyond the scope of this work, but there is an attraction, a voluntary subservience or a complicity to the small micro-fascisms of our times. This question as Buchanan, (2008) indicates would “preoccupy Deleuze and Guattari for the rest of their lives” (p.14).

What makes fascism dangerous is its molecular or micropolitical power, for it is a mass movement: a cancerous body rather than a totalitarian organism... only microfascism provides an answer to the global question: Why does desire, desire its own repression, how can it desire its own repression? ...Leftist organizations will not be the last to secrete microfascisms. It’s too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective. (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p. 215 in Tepper, 2009).

Attempting to point out the issues or ideas that people either do not see or by their silence accept is treated as laughable or accepted as fate. Those critical questions are dismissed, ignored or shunned as the next neoliberal corporate demand or requirement is instituted with very few if any voices raised against it. Those with the least power or most oppressed are tempted most by this corporate acquiescence. Solidarity dissipates in notions of individual success in corporate terms. What happened to a fearless resistance in the academy?

But the present alienation is a different sort of hell. The intensification of the rhythm of work, the desertification of the land-

scape and the virtualization of the emotional life are converging to create a level of loneliness and despair that is difficult to consciously refuse and oppose... (Zizek, 2015, p. 9)

The desire and attraction of microfascism is that the trains run on time and that we are following the rules (Crain, 2013). Classrooms are stages for standardization, and the silence of acceptance. What happened to classrooms as spaces for dialogue, questioning, listening and the development of critical thought? Those classrooms are disappearing in the ever increasing push toward better test scores, accountability (the “face of fascism in America today,” Pinar, 2004, p. 163.), and obedience. We do not resist, but desire even small amounts of power or the nod of approval from those in power. In an interview with Michel Foucault, Deleuze discusses desire, acceptance and power:

how does it happen that those who have little stake in power follow, narrowly espouse, or grab for some piece of power? Perhaps it has to do with *investments*, as much economic as unconscious: there exist investments of desire which explains why one can if necessary desire not against one’s interest, since interest always follows and appears wherever desire places it, but desire in a way that is deeper and more diffuse than one’s interest. We must be willing to hear Reich’s cry: No, the masses were not fooled, they wanted fascism at a particular moment! (Deleuze, 2004, p. 212)

Dialogical classrooms are particularly absent in what can be called the training of teachers. Producing those docile, obedient teachers who will follow pre-packaged or self-scripted lesson plans on the way to better test scores and as a result obtain an increase in pay for performance, perhaps that is a little piece of individual power. The system rewards voluntary subservience and punishes resistance.

With its theater of cruelty and mode of public pedagogy, neoliberalism as a form of economic Darwinism attempts to undermine all forms of solidarity capable of challenging market-driven values and social relations, promoting the virtues of unbridled individualism almost pathological in its disdain for community,

social responsibility, public values and the public good. (Giroux, 2014, p. 2)

How do we face, resist and refuse the desire for the overwhelming power of neoliberalism and the alienation that accompanies it in the world in which we dwell and in classrooms with children and youth?

Hope is certainly an important aspect of this refusal. As Niebuhr states:

For justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness of the soul. Nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power and spiritual wickedness in high places (Niebuhr, 2013, p. 277).

HOPE ABIDES IN A SUBLIME MADNESS OF THE SOUL

I have been bent and broken, but - I hope - into a better shape. (Dickens, 2015, p.447)

Just to hope is to hope in vain. Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope, as an ontological need dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness. And hopelessness can become tragic despair. Hence the need for education in hope. (Freire, 2002, p. 9)

I don't remember much of the months of March and April 2015. The diagnosis from the doctors was not great. All they could tell my wife was my future if there was one was uncertain at best. Full recovery was not certain. Susan never gave up and held strong to hope. I don't remember any of the first 4 1/2 weeks of the ordeal. It was serious. I had a frontal lobe brain trauma with bleeding, a fractured ocular socket (they thought they might have to do reconstructive surgery, but thankfully they didn't have to it healed just fine). I had a fractured clavicle, fractured ribs, broken nose, and numerous scraps, bumps and bruises. I also had to have a tracheotomy to avoid pneumonia and was on the respirator. (ICU trauma unit 1 for 13 days). Susan maintained hope, talked to me, read me Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2007), and played some of my favorite Native American flute music by Carlos Nakai (1993). All of the talk, the reading and the music were, I believe, essential to my recovery, even though I was not consciously aware of it at the

time. In a rather miraculous way I did recover. One day I just woke up, things were clear and I was aware.

There were still weeks and months of rehabilitation, medicine and recovery, but neither Susan nor I gave up hope. We did not face the struggle alone. We had family, friends and colleagues supporting us and that support was a demonstration and example of radical love. I think, however, it was hope and love that got Susan through the early stages and made her strong and steadfast and hope that has been at our side as we have made it this far.

After all, without hope there is little we can do. It will be hard to struggle on, and when we fight as hopeless or despairing persons, our struggle will be suicidal. (Freire, 2014, p. 3)

I raise this autobiographical narrative not as a selfishly absorbed academic, but in a critical way. Hopefully it is a type of critical autobiography. How can this understanding of these experiences of injury, hope and radical love provide ways to understand our work in critical pedagogy? Critical autobiography can lead to critical understandings and understandings of those understandings and hence critical autobiography does not degenerate into selfish solipsism, but generates a strength and understanding that leads to self, agency, and social reconstruction. “To undertake this social and subjective reconstruction, we teachers must remember our past and imagine the future, however unpleasant each domain maybe” (Pinar, 20003, p. 4). Freire (2006) indicated that without a sense of identity there could be no struggle. Experiences such as these also develop in us a more fearless way to face the cruel and unforgiving times I have elaborated above. These times and experiences move us toward becoming what McLaren (2000, p. 174) called “fearless warriors.” Fear is a way to destroy hope and radical love. Fear also diminishes our willingness to become revolutionary. As Freire has indicated, hopelessness is despair. Hope leads to the discussion of critical pedagogy, radical love and listening. They are ways to speak truth to power in these times. At this point historically, although the future can appear bleak and unpleasant to say the least, it must be faced with a fearlessness that is filled with hope and radical love. If we value children, we cannot allow the madness of corporate education

to continue unabated, unchallenged, accepted and even desired. Van Manen (1985) discussed the connections between hope and love.

This experience of hope distinguishes a pedagogic life from a non-pedagogic one. It also makes clear that we can only hope for children we truly love, not in a romantic sense, but in the sense of pedagogic love. What hope give us is the simple avowal, “I will not give up on you. I know you can make a life for yourself.” Thus hope refers to that which gives us patience, tolerance, and belief in the possibilities of our children. (van Manen, 1985 p. 43).

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY WITH RADICAL LISTENING AND LOVE

But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor. 13:13 New American Standard)

Critical pedagogy believes that nothing is impossible when we work in solidarity and with love, respect, and justice as our guiding lights. Indeed, the great Brazilian critical educator Paulo Freire always maintained that education has as much to do with the teachable heart as it does with the mind. Love is the basis of an education that seeks

justice, equality, and genius. If critical pedagogy is not injected with a healthy dose of what Freire called “radical love,” then it will operate only as a shadow of what it could be. Such a love is compassionate, erotic, creative, sensual and informed. Critical pedagogy uses it to increase our capacity to love, to the power of love to our everyday lives and social institutions, to rethink reason in a humane and interconnected manner. (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 9)

The times are cruel and unforgiving. Education at all levels has turned into some horrific daily acquiescent encounter between educators and corporate, privatized demands. Teacher certification depends on the corporate evaluation by Pearson. Pearson is a multinational publishing and education company from Great Britain. It is the largest book publisher, test maker/scorer and education corporation in the world.

If you haven't heard of Pearson, perhaps you have heard of one of the publishers they own, like Adobe, Scott Foresman, Penguin, Longman, Wharton, Harcourt, Puffin, Prentice Hall, or Allyn & Bacon (among others). If you haven't heard of Pearson, perhaps you have heard of one of their tests, like the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Stanford Achievement Test, the Millar Analogy Test, or the G.E.D. Or their data systems, like PowerSchool and SASI. In a little over a decade, Pearson has practically taken over education as we know it. Currently, it is the largest educational assessment company in the U.S. Twenty-five states use them as their only source of large-scale testing, and they give and mark over a billion multiple choice tests every year (Job, 2012, p. 1).

Pearson has most recently moved into the business of teacher certification. In many states the corporation is responsible for the criteria and testing that are required for pre-service teacher certification. In addition the Pearson corporate intrusion/takeover of teacher education tenure is being eliminated. Teacher unions are vilified. Foundations of Education course work is being sanitized or abolished. Colleges of Education are under severe scrutiny and corporate demands on the way to their eventual erasure. As Zizek indicated situations such as these are difficult to refuse and oppose. But critical pedagogy with radical listening and love abides even in these times. The Oxford Dictionaries define the word abide as "continue without fading or being lost." Abiding with our students is a major part of radical love. We stand with our students with radical love. We can also treat, expect and develop a pedagogy in which students, especially those entering the teaching profession, develop into intellectuals not simply clerks.

Such a pedagogy makes problematic how teachers and students sustain, resist, or accommodate those languages, ideologies, social processes, and myths that position them within existing relations of power and dependency. Moreover, it points to the need to develop a theory of politics and culture that analyzes power as an active process – one that is produced as part of a continually shifting balance of resources and practices in the struggle for

privileging specific ways of naming, organizing and experiencing social reality. (Giroux, 1988, p. 101)

It is the knowledge, by those we journey alongside in education that we will not give up on them. We will stick with them and that we are on their side. We will treat them as colleagues on the journey that is critical education. That is crucial to radical love and to our work as critical pedagogues. Of course, there is no method(s) for critical pedagogy, radical love and listening. They cannot be packaged, scripted and disturbed. All of these are ways of being in the world and being with others and are antithetical to the neoliberal obsession with profit and efficiency. There is also no guarantee that working with critical pedagogy, radical love and listening is necessarily or inherently liberating. The positionality and situatedness (notions of place) of all that participate in the dialogue must be part of the discussion. In the dialogue in classrooms, concepts of who we are and where we come from, and valuing as well as questioning those are a first step in the process. Listening is also part of abiding and radical love. Students are not listened to, instead they face endless PowerPoint lectures in some cases created by corporate textbook companies for teachers and professors. In most cases students are not asked for their points of view at all, they are simply required to regurgitate the points memorized from the endless PowerPoint lists on one exam or another. It perpetuates the “culture of silence” Freire (2006) discussed. Freire believed that the banking educational system was one the great maintainers of the culture of silence. When as critical pedagogues we ask for student opinions on issues, they are not exactly sure how to respond because they are not used to their opinions being valued rather they are accustomed to their thoughts and voices being dismissed or denigrated. Critically pedagogy does not participate in the humiliation of students based on their standpoints. Humiliation has no place in a critical pedagogy that embraces radical listening and love. We can certainly interrogate positions we find racist, sexist, homophobic, or classist and raise the questions that lead to understandings.

Again, one way radical love is demonstrated is by radically listening to students’ opinions or points of view and asking them critical questions about their opinions. As Tobin (2011) indicates:

When persons enact radical listening they listen attentively to a speaker, ensure that they understand what has been said, and identify the key components of the speaker's standpoint. Then, rather than arguing a case against what is being proposed; radical listeners endeavor to adopt that standpoint, thereby exploring the possibilities. Only when the possibilities have been reviewed in terms of their viability for the collective are alternatives considered based on different standpoints. Radical listening, therefore, is a respectful way to deal with others' ideas, thereby increasing the possibility of adopting good ideas associated with others' culture. (Tobin, 2011, p. xix)

All of these concerns are certainly antithetical to the current zeitgeist in public schools and universities. Even kindergarten classes are no longer focused on cubbies, naps, playtime, stories and conversations but they are focused on standardized instruction for standardized assessment. Students who are consistently drilled and tested do not have any familiarity with dialogue. Even their reading has been quantified and measured. Rather than reading books as the beginning of discussions about words and the world, the reading process has become consuming books as a precursor to a corporately constructed computer test. For students reading texts becomes consuming pages and for schools it becomes consuming Accelerated Reader² test scores.

Students who are accustomed to having their opinions and ideas ignored or devalued struggle when given the opportunity to give their thoughts and actually have trouble expressing them in fear of the teacher demeaning the ideas or their fellow students criticizing anyone for expressing or having an opinion. The students, who have learned to endure school, believe if they just remain silent the class will be over more quickly. A non-spoken or non-expressed agreement is reached among the students to remain silent. "Our advanced technological society is rapidly making objects of most of us and subtly programming us into conformity to the logic of its system. To the degree that this happens, we are also becoming submerged in a new culture of silence" (Freire, 2006, p. 33). In a critical pedagogy with radical listening and love there are multiple opportunities to express those thoughts and dialogue about them so for even a moment we can break through that

culture of silence. Demonstrating radical love means listening, but it also means that crucial commitment to caring for the students' lives --standing with them. As Freire discussed, care and radical love for the student also entails attempts at developing critical consciousness. The development of critical consciousness and working to understand our students is demonstrating radical love. As Baldwin indicated radical love means making people aware of things they have not seen. "Moreover, he [Freire] insisted that true dialogue could not exist in the absence of love and humility. But for Freire, dialogue also implied a critical posture as well as a preoccupation with the meaning that students use to mediate their world" (Darder, 2002, p. 46). A commitment to criticality is hope, radical listening and love.

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1 See Buchanan, I & Thoburn, N. (2008). *Deleuze and politics*. Edinburg: Edinburg University Press.

2 Accelerated Reader “is a computerized reading management program used at our schools as a supplement for the reading curriculum. The Accelerated Reader program is a computerized program that tests reading comprehension. Students select books on their reading level, read independently or with a buddy, and take an independent comprehension test on the computer.” Retrieved from <http://pinescharter.net/OnlineTools/AcceleratedReader.aspx>

